

## the problem with authority

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# the problem with authority

by [isabilightwood](#)

## Summary

When Qin Su learns the truth about Jin Guangyao after the death of her son, she sacrifice summons Jiang Yanli. It goes slightly sideways.

Jiang Yanli isn't exactly one for revenge. But she does want her brother back, and the cultivation world could do with a bit of fixing. A resurrected Wei Wuxian is all too happy to help. But taking down Jin Guangyao would be easier if Lan Wangji stopped accidentally getting in the way.

## Notes

I love fantasy and sci-fi stories where the protagonist has another person's voice in their head. The vague inspiration for this is *Machineries of Empire*, since I was thinking about parallels between Wei Wuxian and one of its protagonists when I came up with the idea.

See end notes for warnings, particularly if something to do with sacrifice summons might be a trigger!

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*The problem with authority is that if you leave it lying around, others will take it. — Yoon Ha Lee, Ninefox Gambit*

Qin Su was tired of the constant hovering.

Every time she set foot outside her own rooms, she was beset by disciples and the wives of subordinates, telling her over and over *how very sorry* they were.

It was all bullshit.

Fake, social climbing schemers, who were more concerned with the fact that Jin Guangshan's legitimate grandson was once again the sect heir, than sorry for the death of her son. Her A-Song.

They expected her to sob constantly, to wail and tear her hair from her scalp. That they could comfort Qin Su by repeating the same trite, cloying words day-by-day. Earn a little status out of tragedy. If Qin Su had to listen to one more apology, she was going to be sick all over the offending madam's embroidery hoop.

It was true that she still couldn't go a day without crumbling into tears. But mostly, she was numb. Exhausted, in more ways than one. She wanted to go to sleep, and wake with her son tucked safely into bed, or not wake up at all.

The private treasury was the only place where she could be certain she would not be disturbed. Even in her own bedroom, it would only be so long before a maid was sent to find her. Only she and her husband could open the hidden entrance to the vault. Only in the treasury, could she be alone, to find something to distract herself, however briefly, from the avalanche of her grief.

There were still many items that had been claimed by her deceased father-in-law after the war that had not been cataloged. Priceless relics and weapons and irreplaceable texts alike sat neglected in trunks. Jin Guangshan had cared only for possession, occasionally touting one item or another out to show off. Ten months after A-Yao's succession, shelves continued to sit empty. Neither she nor A-Yao had found the time, busy keeping everything running smoothly, as he made bids for projects he called *progress* with the gleam in his eyes that had first made her chase after him. Back when he seemed flattered by her attention, interested in her as more than a friend or colleague.

Qin Su herself managed the internal minutiae of the Sect and oversaw disciple training. The latter would traditionally fall to the Head Disciple, but they had lost one after another. The

woman who had been intended to aid Jin Zixuan had resigned over some disagreement before his death. Her replacement, a second or third cousin to the main Jin Clan, married out to the leader of the Fengyang Hua Sect, a growing sect that bordered Gusu and Lanling. *Their* replacement died at Nightless City, along with the next dozen or so disciples in line. And so Qin Su was free to manage the training as she wished.

Or had been, until she was asked to take a step back from training, for fear her grief would destabilize her qi. It was true that she had been unable to focus. However, stewing in the unending reminders that she would never hold A-Song in her arms again was no help. Attending to her duties as a hostess only made it worse.

Sorting the looted relics was mindless work, that required none of the focus she had lacked for the forty-one days since A-Song's death. But it was something to occupy her hands, and some small part of her thoughts.

She began with the books that day, sorting into titles that were common and could be sold, those that needed to be repaired, and those too dangerous to be held anywhere but the treasury. Qin Su moved to start a new pile, for useful, rare texts that should be copied, on a table, and a disorganized pile of notes and notebooks caught her eye.

It was the disorganization that stood out. A-Yao *never* left anything out like that. He must have been called away, but if he returned and saw it, that would trigger his own flood of tears. Qin Su had heard him sobbing, late into the night, from the next room over. But each morning, he greeted his work with his habitual dedication, no matter how puffy his eyes, or how little he'd slept. A-Yao would never forgive himself if his work was delayed by his composure crumbling over a small thing out of place.

She picked up the papers, intending only to organize them into an even stack, and place them evenly between the notebooks. But their subject caught her attention.

A circular array was drawn on each paper. Identical, to her unpracticed eyes, with varied notes printed in precise calligraphy in different locations on each page.

Qin Su had always focused on the sword, leaving talismans to those with innovative minds yet weaker cores, like her husband. Yet this array made her look twice.

*Sacrifice Summon* was written at the top of the first page, the one with the least writing. *The soul of the caster is permanently exchanged for that of a chosen spirit or ghost, fully resurrecting the deceased.* It was a complex design, meant to be drawn in the blood of the caster.

Voices, from the other side of the portal. A-Yao must have wanted to show an item from the vault to a guest. Her heartbeat sped up, her hands shaking as she dropped the papers back onto the table.

The last thing Qin Su wanted was to have to greet her husband's guests, while he smiled his disappointment in her for shirking her duties.

She raised the tablecloth and ducked beneath, knocking one of the papers off the table as she did so. Catching it, she pulled it to her chest, dropping the cloth back into place just in time.

It was dark in the small space, and stuffy. Her heart hammered hard enough Qin Su felt certain it must be audible throughout the room. But her presence was not discovered, and so Qin Su did not have to answer as to why Jin-furen was hiding from her own husband.

“The remainder of the He Clan has been dealt with.” Su Minshan reported. His voice was easily identifiable from the obsequiousness with which he always treated her husband. She’d asked A-Yao what he saw in him once, and he’d flashed his dimples at her and said, *unfaltering loyalty is a trait I cannot afford to lose*. So Qin Su tolerated Su Minshan, though he made her skin crawl. And made certain never to be caught alone with him. “Xue Yang tracked them down to the last man.”

Why he kept Xue Yang around, on the other hand, was a mystery.

“Good, that’s good,” A-Yao said. Never shy of heaping praise on his subordinates, he would be smiling up at the other man. “Tell me, what did Xue Yang bring back with him?”

“A few urchins, from town. He said they were his payment for leaving the bodies alone.” Su Minshan scoffed, disgusted.

It didn’t *sound* like Xue Yang had brought the children to become disciples.

There was the slap of a forehead hitting a palm. A-Yao’s voice was slightly muffled as he gave an exasperated sigh. “I *told* him he could experiment with animals or dead bodies or not at all. Especially not children.” There was the slightest break in his voice at the word children. “Xue Yang has outlived his usefulness. Have him disposed of and left somewhere remote.”

The command was delivered coldly, casually. He sounded nothing like the warm, if more distant than Qin Su had initially expected, husband she knew.

“Yes, Zongzhu.” A pair of disciples said, their footsteps receding as they took their leave.

“Your research is not completed, is it?” Su Minshan asked, once they were gone.

“I have better means now. My dear younger brother is eager to please, and will not dismember the test animals for kicks and giggles.” A-Yao spoke as though this was an ongoing discussion, yet Qin Su, his wife, had never heard a whisper of research on animals before that day. Only of field testing of the Yiling Patriarch’s inventions. “Or decide to run tests on townspeople and dismember them, too.”

Just what had her husband been allowing Xue Yang to do? It seemed impossible that flighty little Mo Xuanyu could achieve it, whatever it was.

“Another headache eliminated, then.” Su Minshan said. “That’s nearly all the most dangerous ones out of the way.”

There was a weighted pause before A-Yao replied, incongruously. “I did love my son, you know.”

“I did not mean to imply otherwise.” Su Minshan rushed to assure him. “I am deeply sorry this step was necessary.”

Step? What was he implying about A-Song?

“If only that woman had told you the truth earlier.” Su Minshan snarled. “Keeping it a secret while her daughter courted her own half-brother? What a selfish bitch.”

*What?* Qin Su clapped her hands over her mouth, stifling a choked gasp.

“Now, Minshan, please. You remember what my father was like. We were all of us his victims. A-Su, me, and both of our mothers.” For the first time, Qin Su understood what Lianfang-zun’s detractors meant when they said he dripped insincerity. “Ultimately, A-Song’s death can be placed at his feet.”

*But A-Song was murdered after Jin Guangshan died*, she thought stupidly. Utterly frozen in place, the short, harsh pants of her breath the only sign she had not just been dropped into hell. The two men spoke for a few more minutes, but Qin Su didn’t hear a word.

It was some time after they left that Qin Su moved, her stiff joints causing her to fall onto her side on the edge of the tablecloth.

How was she ever supposed to face the court, knowing what she did now? Look her *half-brother* in the face without screaming?

The honorable thing would be to expose him, and to then take her own life to restore her own honor.

She couldn’t. She couldn’t do that to her father, to her older siblings. Half-siblings, now, she supposed, with a crazed giggle. The only *real* siblings, the only real *father* Qin Su would ever have. It would be better if they never knew what had happened to their mother. To her.

But she couldn’t carry on as she had, either.

The forgotten paper crinkled in her hands. The Sacrifice Summon. Exchanging her life for another’s.

Was that the solution she was searching for? Could she?

Qin Su remembered her husband’s - her *brother’s* voice saying *especially not children*. Only breaths before declaring his own son’s death necessary.

Her A-Song was lost forever.

There was, however, another child under Lianfang-zun’s care. Another mother whose son was not lost, but who had nevertheless lost the chance to see him grow. If Qin Su exchanged her life for that woman’s, perhaps her soul would pass on quickly enough to find A-Song in another life.

Jiang Yanli would see Jin Ling grow up safely, ensure Lianfang-zun did not keep the power he had married his own sister and murdered his own son to secure.

That would be best for everyone.

Qin Su shakily extracted herself from beneath the table, returning to the one room she could be certain Lianfang-zun would never enter.

Now she knew why.

Locking the door to her room, Qin Su emptied what little was in her stomach into the chamber pot. When she was through, she began to draw the array.

The first thing Jiang Yanli noticed was the silence. She had been on the battlefield at Nightless City, pushed A-Xian aside, and a sword went through her heart —

She had been dead. She was certain.

*Oh, A-Xian. What did you do?*

Slowly, Jiang Yanli sat up. She was sprawled on the floor of a well-appointed lady's bedroom. In Koi Tower, by the color scheme, but its occupant had uncommon taste. Rather than gilded everything, there were accents of gold on the drapery and to emphasize ink paintings of the ocean and a palace she did not recognize.

There was also the matter of the array of blood that surrounded her. Demonic cultivation, which only supported her certainty that A-Xian was involved. But where was he? And if she was in Koi Tower, where was her son?

*Yunmeng*, something inside her whispered. Though she could not explain why, she knew it was true.

Checking herself for cuts, she found a gash across the palm of her hand. But it was already sealing, far faster than Jiang Yanli had healed from so much as a paper cut before her death.

She wasn't an expert in raising the dead like her brother, but Jiang Yanli was fairly certain fierce corpses did not work that way. At the very least, she should have been bleeding black. Yet her blood was as red as ever.

Getting to her feet, she started to inspect the room for clues. On the way to the desk, she passed a mirror. Her gaze skipped past a mirror. And snapped back.

It was not Jiang Yanli's face that looked back.

This woman's face was rounder and softer than her own. Pretty, with a natural pink in her cheeks where Jiang Yanli's had always had to be painted on, due to the frequency with which she lost her breath and grew dizzy. There, too, was a hint of the agelessness that came with a fully developed golden core. With a feeling of foreboding, Jiang Yanli felt along her

meridians until she reached her core. No longer a weak, underdeveloped thing due to her inability to practice the heavily physical Jiang techniques, it shone bright and strong.

That was a point against this being A-Xian's doing. He wouldn't have stolen her a body, when he could simply bring back her own.

*Why am I alive?* Asked a voice in her head.

That would have been a reasonable question. Only it wasn't Jiang Yanli thinking it.

Maybe resurrection came with the ability to understand spirits. The results were entirely untested, so it was possible. Yet the voice seemed certain it was alive. If her current state was due to demonic cultivation, she might as well do what A-Xian would: experiment.

"I could ask you the same question." Jiang Yanli told the voice.

*Jiang Yanli? It worked! But why am I in your head?*

"Are you the one who brought me back?" She tilted her head back, trying to place the way the voice made her head feel. Almost like the moment at the start of meditation when she began to forget her body to focus on her spirit, but with a disconnect keeping her grounded.

*Yes. And then, I can hear your thoughts,* the voice said, *you don't need to speak out loud.*

That was disconcerting. *Is this your body?* She thought at the voice.

*Yes.* The voice said. *Stop calling me that. I'm Qin Su.*

Strangely, it was a relief to have a name. It made Qin Su feel more real than anything else in this surreal afterlife. *So it would be more accurate to say I'm in your head. Am I possessing you?*

*It was supposed to be an exchange. My soul for yours.*

Well clearly, it hadn't worked that way.

Responding to her unformed question, the woman continued. *The array is on the desk.*

*This...* It was obviously A-Xian's work, copied out by a more careful hand. But it looked incomplete, a half-developed first draft or his scattered notes on an older text that he could always piece back together perfectly, but left out crucial details for anyone else. Utterly unlike the labeled, if nearly illegible, minutiae on his complete work. Jiang Yanli would never have cast an array with so little information. Especially not one of A-Xian's.

*I didn't know the Yiling Patriarch. And I wasn't exactly thinking clearly.*

No, she supposed not. Anyone casting this array would have to be desperate.

*Everything fell apart and I just... used what I had on hand.* There was the impression of a shrug, like her mind contorting itself into a new shape. *My impulse decisions always have*



*terrible consequences.*

*That's how I ended up pregnant and marrying the last person in the world I should have.* Qin Su gave a short, harsh burst of hysterical laughter, startling Jiang Yanli into making the same noise aloud.

Telling whoever this abusive asshole was that her husband had died only a week ago, and she was certainly not performing any marital duties could wait until she figured out what Qin Su had done.

*There are other pages with more notes in the treasury.*

Jiang Yanli sprang to her feet. *I'll need to see them immediately.*

She slid open the doors, and came face to face with a maid carrying cleaning supplies. Jiang Yanli quickly shut the doors behind her, so the maid could not catch a glimpse of the blood still staining the floor.

“Oh! Jin-furen.” The maid bowed deeply. “This one apologizes for assuming you would be out.”

It was something of a shock to be addressed by a title that had, from her perspective, belonged to her mother-in-law only yesterday. *Jin-furen?*

*Ah, yes. I've been Jin-furen since Jin Guangshan... passed... ten months ago.* The word “passed” came with a flash of embarrassment, telling Jiang Yanli enough for her to extrapolate the cause of death.

Jin Guangyao must be Jin-zongzhu then. Strange, he hadn't seemed the abusive type.

*Not abuse. Worse.* Qin Su gagged in her mind, making Jiang Yanli do the same.

“Are you all right, Jin-furen?” The maid asked, hovering closer.

At least the gagging gave her an excuse not to allow anyone inside. “I'll be fine. But please wait to clean until tomorrow. I'm afraid I'm not feeling well. Would you have some soup sent on a tray for my dinner?”

“Of course, Jin-furen.” The maid backed away, bowed, and hurried off.

Jiang Yanli turned to inspect the door, placing her hands on her hips. With Qin Su's Golden Core, she could likely cast a locking spell. If she knew how, that was. She had always relied on A-Xian's talismans, many of which he developed specifically for her. Unfortunately, she had none on hand.

*That's easy.* Qin Su said. *Draw the characters for lock, then modify it with...*

It took Jiang Yanli a few tries to draw properly on her new core, but she was able to lock the door against casual entry. No cultivator with a sword would be kept out for long, but they would have to be willing to trespass in Jin-furen's bedchamber.

The thin flush of victory faded the second she stepped through the treasury portal. Suibian lay on a shelf, visible from the door. A-Xian had not carried his sword for a long time. But he would never have handed it over to the Jin Clan, unless it was directly into Jiang Yanli's arms. Something had gone terribly wrong.

*Qin Su. Why is my A-Xian's sword in the treasury?* Jiang Yanli demanded. The answering silence was deafening. "Qin Su! Tell me why!"

*He... died. At Nightless City. Not long after you did.* Qin Su's voice was hesitant, as though confused why she cared.

"No!" She let out a choked sob, clasping a hand over her mouth. A-Xian wasn't — he couldn't be —

*Didn't he kill you? I was told —*

"No! Never!" A-Xian would never have hurt her. *I tried to save him.*

Silence, for a moment, other than Jiang Yanli's own ragged breaths. Then, *I'm sorry. I've learned a lot of things I believed were lies today. Perhaps what they said about him was too.*

*They were.* A-Xian was bright, and good, and cared too much. He had never been what they thought. Jiang Yanli had not needed to ask to know A-Xuan's death was a horrible mistake, likely the result of stepping in between his cruel, vindictive cousin and her brother at the wrong moment. If he had meant to kill Jin Zixun, A-Xian had had good reason.

*I think anyone who had the misfortune of meeting Jin Zixun considered killing him.* Qin Su said wryly.

Jiang Yanli had had those thoughts. She gave a watery giggle that was answered in her head. It was sweet of Qin Su to try to comfort her when she could feel that she was still reeling for her own reasons. The least Jiang Yanli could do in return was get her some answers.

*On the table.*

She found the stack of diagrams easily, along with a tattered notebook that appeared to contain A-Xian's original work. Jiang Yanli flipped through that, knowing that unless had both gotten a hold of one of the few people that could read his note-taking scrawl — her, Lan Wangji, and perhaps Wen Qing, who had taken their turns as A-Xian's sounding board in succession — *and* convinced them to help details would likely have been missed.

*You can read that?* Qin Su was incredulous.

*Years of practice,* she replied. Before Lan Wangji, Jiang Yanli had been the only person who took A-Xian's inventions seriously, the only person willing to sit and listen while he bounced from idea to idea, eventually solving the problem himself.

The average person would not think it necessary to puzzle out the text under a sketch of Lan Wangji holding a child, assuming it was a caption. When it was, in fact, an absolutely crucial

detail. A detail that had made A-Xian conclude the Sacrifice Summon Array should never be used.

There were perhaps a dozen variations on the array. Most worked in a similar way to what Qin Su had intended, summoning a spirit to take the caster's place. The earliest could not target a specific soul, but A-Xian had worked that out. Luckily, Qin Su had used one of those arrays, allowing Jiang Yanli to be summoned, rather than causing the closest vengeful spirits to battle for her body. The very last caused the caster's body to be torn apart, and replaced with a copy of the spirit's own.

But every version had two things in common: a call for revenge, and the destruction of the caster's soul.

In her mind, Qin Su went perfectly still.

Jiang Yanli had a theory as to why Qin Su's soul had not been consumed by the array. It had started the job, pulling Jiang Yanli in, but Qin Su had not asked for revenge, and so the array spat most of her back out. What the consequences were, for either of their spirits, she could not begin to guess.

There was a distinctive air of panic to Qin Su's continued silence.

*Qin Su, Jiang Yanli prodded, if this had worked the way it's written, your soul would have been consumed by it. What could have been worth this?*

*I didn't know about that. I didn't want that.*

*It didn't happen. You're still here.* She attempted to reassure Qin Su, wishing there was a way to mentally pat someone on the head. That had always helped calm both her brothers.

*I'm still here. Whatever the fuck that means.* Qin Su giggled nervously. *That wasn't very ladylike.*

*I think it's forgivable, under the circumstances.* Jiang Yanli raised a sleeve to cover her smile.

*You don't know the half of it.* Qin Su sighed. *I didn't think things like this happened, outside of stories.*

Jiang Yanli waited for her to go on, gritting her teeth in response to a wave of bitterness.

*Only a few hours ago, I found out my so-called husband is my half-brother and he murdered our son. And now here we are.*

*Oh.* Jiang Yanli could not so much as think of a reassuring response. *What the fuck is correct.*

"A-Su," Jin Guangyao said from behind her, before Qin Su could say anything more. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

## Chapter End Notes

- Warnings: Off-page suicide by a POV character who does not know the sacrifice summon would normally destroy her soul. It's portrayed as done in a mixture of grief and panic, and she ends up residing in her own mind, while JYL has control of her body. I'm not just leaving her stuck exactly that way permanently though! I'll do additional warnings by chapter. Please let me know if I didn't notice needs one!
- If the specific way I describe sacrifice summons sounds familiar, you've probably read [my fierce corpse! Wen Qing fic](#) I wrote out that section and was like oh, hey! That solves a problem in my next fic. (For, uh, reasons, WWX can't come back the same way as JYL)
- I'm treating the cultivation world sects kind of like China's old vassal/client state system for this one!

I appreciate all kudos and comments, and you can find me on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#)!

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Jiang Yanli and Qin Su adjust to their new circumstances. Jin Guangyao has no idea what he's in for.

### Chapter Notes

No specific warnings for this chapter, I think, other than a brief, non-graphic summary of how Jin Rusong died.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jiang Yanli froze at the sound of Jin Guangyao's voice. She was nowhere near ready to deal with him, much less the knowledge that they were technically married. She — and Qin Su — needed time before she could hope to successfully deceive him.

And she had seconds to figure out how they were going to get it.

She sniffed, loudly, hoping it would seem like she had only been standing there, crying silently. She tucked A-Xian's notebook into her robes.

“Oh, A-Su, I miss him too.” Jin Guangyao sounded so genuinely sympathetic that she could scarcely tell the difference, even knowing what he'd done. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, and it was all Jiang Yanli could do not to flinch.

The way Qin Su was practically screaming in her head did not help. She would be little help, this confrontation coming far too soon.

What would a still ignorant Qin Su have done? Jiang Yanli didn't yet know her well enough to say.

Jiang Yanli wiped her eyes as she turned in his arms, the skin around her eyes still tinted red from learning about A-Xian. That should help sell the ruse, even against a man so devoted to power he had married his own sister.

“I know,” She lied, sniffing again. “It's just so hard, being here. I keep getting up to check on him in the night —” she didn't actually know the name of the boy yet, which could be a problem if Qin Su remained incoherent — “And then I remember.”

“I know how you feel.” He said with a sigh. “I keep thinking it’s time to start teaching A-Song his first core formation exercises.”

“I think — I think I need to get away for a bit.” Jiang Yanli whispered.

“Perhaps that would be for the best.” He began rubbing her back, which made her want to sob. “Were you thinking of somewhere in particular?”

Her first instinct was to say Lotus Pier.

*Gusu. The Cloud Recesses.* Qin Su managed to say.

Of course. There was a healer there, who specialized in recovery from grief. If she were to go on a retreat for recovery, the Cloud Recesses were the logical place. But — A-Ling was in Yunmeng. Every moment away from him was a physical ache in her chest. How was A-Cheng managing, taking care of her son on his own?

*He’s been doing fine raising him half the year for six years. Jiang Wanyin is A-Ling’s favorite.*

Oh. Jiang Yanli’s heart swelled. It must be difficult, but A-Cheng was doing wonderfully.

*It would seem strange if I went to Yunmeng,* Qin Su admitted. *Unless you want Jiang Wanyin to know?*

*Not yet,* she had to confess. A-Cheng would be overwhelmingly happy to see her, but he would quickly spirit her away and rush off to reveal the truth. Without a scrap of evidence beyond second-hand testimony. Neither of her brothers had ever been logical, when she was even mildly insulted.

“Gusu,” She didn’t have to fake the choked sound of her voice. How long would it be before she could confirm with her own eyes that her son and her baby brother were alive and well?

*Jiang Wanyin has A-Ling for the summer, about three more months.*

An eternity.

Jin Guangyao’s smile wavered.

*A- Lianfang-zun,* Qin Su corrected herself, *thinks I don’t know, but I noticed him pining after Zewu-jun long before we married. Zewu-jun was here for a week, after A-song —* She broke off. *He saw more of my so-called husband than I did.*

“Why don’t you invite your erge back for a few days while I’m gone?” She suggested. “I know you’re busy, but perhaps he could spare a few days?”

“Thank you, A-Su, that’s very thoughtful.” His smile returned, only now she thought it might be genuine. “I could arrange for you to leave as soon as tomorrow, if that pleases you.”

“Yes,” She said quietly. “I would like that.”

As it turned out, Gusu Lan's mind healer was useful to both of them for more than merely an excuse.

She had not known what to expect from a healer who specialized in injuries that could not be seen, but it was not Tan Wurui. He was a young man with round, expressive features who wore the plain forehead ribbon of outer disciples.

When he began their first meeting by offering her huamei, Jiang Yanli decided she liked him. Candy was against the rules, outside of festivals, but preserved plums were technically medicinal. She took one, with a carefully weak smile.

Sitting back on her heels, she tried to place why Tan-daifu looked familiar. Finally, she realized. They had been classmates, once. He had lived a few doors down from Jiang Yanli when she was a guest disciple, so he must have transitioned after her stay. He had been friendly and helpful, more likely to correct rules violations than to report them.

"Eat that if you need a moment to gather your thoughts, or you're starting to feel overwhelmed." He plucked a plum of his own from the bowl, rolling it between his fingers. "Now, to start, is this the first time you've dealt with loss?"

The answer for Jiang Yanli was no, of course. Grief had become almost a familiar friend, since her parents were killed. Yet it had stabbed her in the back as surely as the sword that killed her pierced her heart.

Her loss was different from Qin Su's. Jiang Yanli's son was still alive, if out of reach and grown from an infant to a boy in an instant. But she had not had the chance to mourn her husband when A-Xian was stolen as well.

She had no idea, however, whether Qin Su had. And Qin Su wasn't sharing.

While Tan-daifu waited patiently for an answer that should have been easy.

Jiang Yanli prodded with mental fingers until Qin Su gave up the answer. *My mother. But she was... it wasn't the same.*

"No," She said aloud. "But not like this."

Tan-daifu nodded. "Are you ready to talk about what happened?"

Qin Su had curled up in her mind since the conversation with Jin Guangyao. Unfurling slowly in fits and starts, only to shrink back at the wrong reminder. As she did then.

Jiang Yanli nibbled at her plum, the spiced sweet and sour flavor spreading across her tongue. As though in response to the flavor, Qin Su startled, cautiously peering out from her ball.

"I thought you might not be." He offered her a serene smile. "For now, why don't we discuss how you've been coping, and what your goals are in coming here."

Jiang Yanli conjured descriptions of how she thought the courtiers of Lanling would have treated her, had she lived. It wasn't difficult to imagine, considering how they had ingratiated themselves when she wasn't vulnerable. Qin Su confirmed her suspicions, and added on, *They wouldn't let me do anything.*

"I felt like I was drowning in Koi Tower." She concluded. "I haven't stopped feeling that way. However, there's... less of him, here."

Less of Qin Su's A-Song, and less positive memories of A-Xuan, but more of A-Xian. Happy ones. The last time she could remember him being truly, uncomplicatedly happy.

"Locations can become heavily associated with certain people, or events. If coming here helps you feel a little closer to air, it was the right decision." Tan-daifu said. "It sounds like you were trapped with your grief, through inactivity. You have not kept up even basic exercises with your sword?"

"The healers in Lanling told me I should refrain from using my spiritual energy." She said carefully. While in the Cloud Recesses, Jiang Yanli needed to begin learning to use Qin Su's sword. While Qin Su might not be renowned for her skills like the heroes of the Sunshot Campaign, she was known to be competent. Jiang Yanli could not avoid it forever, when Qin Su trained the disciples.

"Though Lanling Jin's healers have released a number of revolutionary medicinal treatments recently, they have not yet understood the relationship between the mind and qi." Though Tan-daifu kept his voice steady, he was no Lan Wangji. A tick in his cheek betrayed his disdain. "Excessive use while recovering could cause a qi deviation. However, light exercise helps rejuvenate the mind and keeps your body healthy and qi balanced."

With Tan-daifu's permission, Jiang Yanli was able to practice the Jin sword forms in the private courtyard of her guest house every morning. Twice a week, she met with him. Most of her time, however, was left to her own discretion.

Once Jiang Yanli adjusted to Qin Su's body, she found that much of her skill had carried over into muscle memory. It was simply a matter of practicing until her mind adjusted to her body's knowledge.

Cultivation, however, was far more complicated. Cultivation was linked to the spirit, not the physical body, and so Qin Su had to teach her, step by step, skills that junior disciples learned the year they received their swords.

She could not show her by doing. Though Jiang Yanli attempted to retreat within her mind, and allow Qin Su to take control of her own limbs, it seemed Jiang Yanli was firmly rooted within the body they now shared.

Qin Su wasn't. If she strained, she could reach outward until, for an instant, look down and see her body from above before snapping back inside.

The teaching seemed to help Qin Su more than anything.



*Why did no one teach you this?* She snapped in exasperation, as Jiang Yanli struggled through the steps of directing her spiritual energy for donation. It was the strongest reaction she'd prompted in weeks.

*I didn't have enough to spare. My parents planned to send me to Dafan, to develop my core without the physical aspect. But by the time I was old enough, the sect had become an ordinary village.* No other sect had similar techniques, so she'd had to rely on meditation, talismans, and her brothers.

*Oh. You do now.* From then on, Qin Su latched onto the teaching like a project. If it did not to make her less sad, it at least made her more responsive.

That would have been enough to keep them busy, but it was critical that Jiang Yanli memorize the changes in the Cultivation world. If she said the wrong thing to a sect leader, or Jin Guangyao, that would be the end. She read through the piles of official documents in the library, with more subjective commentary from Qin Su.

They started with the greatest risk: Qin Su's family.

*Father spoils me, but he still sees me as his baby girl. Jie — Qin Xifeng, the heir — was always busy. It's Yi-ge we have to worry about.* Qin Su explained, as she looked over records of how Laoling Qin's trade had grown and alliances shifted after their Second Young Mistress became Jin-furen.

Ironically, Qin Xifeng was the only member of the Qin clan Jiang Yanli had met before, when she accompanied A-Xuan to the Sunshot Campaign. She'd found it funny, in retrospect, how awkwardly A-Xuan had interacted with her, considering none of his few close companions were men.

An ache rose in her chest as she remembered teasing him about it, on the night of his cousin Jin Huiqing's wedding to Sect Leader Hua. Though distantly related, they were his favorite relative. A letter from Luo Qingyang had arrived the same day. Zixuan flushed prettily, and told her that was different. He hadn't been able to think clearly, through the things Jiang Yanli did to his heart.

She'd grabbed the restraints and climbed on top of him, proceeding to reward her husband for being such a silly romantic. Zixuan had been certain that was the night A-Ling was conceived.

She missed him with her entire being.

*Uh. Yanli-jie.* Qin Su sounded pained. *That's my half-brother.*

She winced. Given Qin Su's history, that had to be much worse than the time Jiang Yanli had accidentally found A-Xian's poorly concealed stash. Especially considering how unconventional their sex life had been. *Sorry. I'll work on trying to shield some of my thoughts from you.*

Qin Su quickly returned to the original topic. *Yi-ge is only a year older than me, so we've always been close. He's been busy setting up the Laoling watchtowers lately, so hopefully we can avoid him until you're better at acting like me.*

*Am I that bad?* She asked.

*Not for most people. But I'm his baby sister, and you've always been the eldest.*

Jiang Yanli could see how that might be a problem. *Are you more 'A-Su is three' or 'go away Ge, no wait, play with me?'*

Shock flared from Qin Su. *Neither! I just whine a little and he pretends he's going to say no. What are your brothers?*

Damaged. While A-Cheng postured and yelled and hid how much he cared, A-Xian crafted a mask of harmlessness, hiding what he needed. Just as Jiang Yanli had. They hadn't had much choice.

Qin Su's silence was its own response.

From there, they moved on to other sects.

*So the Luo Sect has climbed back into favor?* Though Luo Qingyang had joined the Jin Sect in her youth, as was sometimes done to protect the heir of a minor sect against rivalry, her outspoken support of A-Xian and departure had driven her birth sect to retreat from Lanling. As a result, Jiang Yanli had never met Mianmian's uncle or cousin, and so had no measure of their character.

*The Sect heir is very... earnest. Lianfang-zun likes to surround himself with simple men. I used to think it was because they didn't poke fun at his heritage.* Her more recent conclusions were left unspoken.

Other changes were more startling. Not only had Tingshan He been absorbed into Lanling itself, but there were thirteen sects jostling for territory in former Qishan, most of them vassals to the Jin. Which made sense, as most of the sects had originated as single-town cultivation clans within Lanling. The Jin had been the only sect with cultivators to spare, and taken advantage of the opening.

Sects had only been beginning to spring up in Qishan when she died. Now, they were fully formed, squabbling and jostling for influence.

There was a seemingly endless amount of ground to cover, in the weeks in Gusu.

It surprised her, how little she saw of the main branch of the Lan Clan. During her last stay, she could not have thrown a stone without hitting one.

She had spoken with Lan Qiren only once, upon her arrival. He'd harrumphed and bid her the necessary welcome, and proceeded to ignore her existence. That suited her well enough.

Though Zewu-jun had been expected to return from Lanling a week into her stay, he had been called away to deal with a crisis for Nie Huaisang. That was another shock, Nie Huaisang as sect leader. A-Xian would have laughed himself silly. A-Cheng must be going spare.

Lan Xichen's continued absence was fortunate. He, unlike any other Lan, knew Qin Su. Enough that he might notice a misstep.

It was Lan Wangji's absence that concerned her.

If there was anyone who might have mourned A-Xian, it was Lan Wangji, but he was nowhere to be found. Not at meals, and not along the paths of the Cloud Recesses.

*Hanguang-jun often travels these days, I've heard.* Qin Su informed her, with an undertone of surprised curiosity. *So he really was in love with Wei Wuxian?*

*They loved each other.* Jiang Yanli had known long before either of them.

It was a shock, the one time she did see Lan Wangji.

On the afternoon Qin Su was ready to discuss her loss, Jiang Yanli knelt on the cushions across from Tan-daifu's desk, a cup of perfectly brewed tea cooling before her. The usual bowl of plums sat between them.

Tan-daifu smiled pleasantly, waiting for her to begin. And Qin Su froze up.

"Perhaps if we take a walk?" Tan-daifu suggested, when she said nothing.

Tan-daifu led her to the back trails, along the river where Jiang Yanli's breathing had once faltered as she searched for her brother, and A-Xuan caught her as she fell.

*At least this time that's romantic.* Qin Su grumbled, the first thing she'd said since they entered Tan-daifu's office.

*Not really.* She remembered how he'd left her behind, the harsh words he'd said.

*They tell that story like you were star-crossed lovers kept apart by the Yiling Patriarch. But really, your husband was just being an idiot.*

*A-Xian punched some sense into him.* Remembering the soup incident, she added, *Twice.*

After a pause, Qin Su hesitantly said, *I think I'm ready to talk now.*

The words poured from her like a dam had broken.

Jiang Yanli recounted Qin Su's words verbatim, how she left for a meeting after putting A-Song to bed. How she was accosted the moment she entered the Fragrance Hall on her return. How she fought, desperately, to reach her son, even after receiving a gut wound. How Jin Guangyao arrived with guards, and she finally made it through. How she saw the body of the nursemaid first, sprawled in a pool of blood, and crumbled into denial when she realized her

son wasn't breathing. How she'd had to be sedated to receive treatment for her wound, and refused to believe it for days after.

The words tapered off, and stopped. Jiang Yanli took a plum from the bag Tan-daifu offered her, and popped one in her mouth.

The rest of it could not be shared. But to her surprise, Qin Su did not retreat entirely. She shrank back, but did not become unreachable.

"Thank you, for sharing," Tan-daifu said. "Sometimes it helps, but only when you're ready."

His understanding silence was a pleasant relief.

On the way back, they came across a boy playing in a field of snow-white rabbits. Jiang Yanli stopped, watching with a longing that was not only hers.

She wondered if A-Ling liked rabbits, or if his jiujiu had allowed him to have a dog, as was a more traditional spiritual animal for a young heir.

*Jin Guangyao has wanted to give A-Ling a spiritual dog for some time, but Jiang-zongzhu keeps saying no. No one knows why.* Qin Su mused.

Oh, A-Cheng. He must be so lonely. Still keeping dogs out of Lotus Pier, as though A-Xian might come wandering back one day.

(And might he not? A part of her whispered, the thought too fleeting for Qin Su to pick up.)

Though she had no doubt A-Cheng had the loyalty of his sect, that the disciples he'd trained loved him and would die for him, he had never learned that letting someone in wasn't weakness. Without A-Xian, without her...

She wished there was a way she could tell him he wasn't alone, to hold A-Cheng and A-Ling in her arms, without risking Jin Guangyao piecing together the truth.

She must have made a noise, because Tan-daifu looked at her in concern, and the boy looked up. He set down the rabbit in his lap, and shooed away the others surrounding him with gentle, practiced gestures. Getting to his feet, the boy burst into a run.

When he reached them, he bowed. A model Lan, were it not for the blades of grass clinging to his robes. He was about ten, she thought, if a little short for his age. The cloud embroidery on his ribbon marked him as a member of the main clan. "Daifu! Are you here to play with the rabbits?"

*So Lans aren't born knowing all the rules, after all.* Qin Su observed. *I thought there might be truth to that rumor.*

It was a good thing Jiang Yanli was already smiling.

"Not today," Tan-daifu said. "Our little radish has already taken good care of them, I'm sure."

The boy scrunched up his nose, and Jiang Yanli could have sworn it was identical to A-Xian's. "I'm not a little radish anymore! And the rabbits always want more ear scratches. Will you play with the rabbits, guniang? They always make Fuqin happier when he's sad, like you are."

"I—" How insightful. His eyes were wide and pleading, the look of a boy practiced at getting what he wanted by convincing an adult it had been their idea. She would have caved, easily, if a man in white had not come running. He came to a stop, panting, by the boy's side.

Panting, running, the collar of his robes out of place and his guan tilted out of center. Lan Wangji seemed so little like himself, and yet was unmistakable.

*All in white*, Jiang Yanli thought with a pang. *He still misses him.*

"Fuqin!" The boy cried happily, bouncing to grasp Lan Wangji's leg.

*Did you know Hanguang-jun had a son?* She asked.

*I had no idea.* Qin Su was as shocked as she was.

"A-Yuan." Hanguang-jun stooped to pick him up, a grimace crossing his face as he stood, though he should have been able to lift Lan Yuan with ease. "We have spoken about talking to strangers."

There was open panic in his eyes, as he glanced at her. She'd seen that look before, when A-Xian was in danger, but never directed at her.

No. Not at Jiang Yanli, but at Madame Jin.

"Put me down! Bobo said you shouldn't try to lift me anymore." Lan Yuan squirmed, and was back on his feet. Strange, she didn't think Lan Wangji had let him go. "And Tan-daifu is here! I wasn't unsupervised."

Lan Wangji glanced at her again, his expression back to its habitual blankness. But his distress remained almost tangible.

She bowed. "Hanguang-jun."

He looked away sharply, taking his son's hand. "Let us go. It is time for your guqin lesson."

"Mn!" Lan Yuan hummed eagerly, allowing his father to lead him away, and began chattering about the rabbits. "I think Xiao Yun is going to have babies soon!"

As they walked away, she noted that Lan Wangji's movements were slightly stiff. A far cry from the graceful Hanguang-jun she'd often glimpsed from afar, fighting back-to-back with A-Xian.

"My most sincere apologies, Jin-furen." Tan-daifu turned to her and bowed. Before she could ask what for, he continued. "Lan Sizhui was adopted. Hanguang-jun is very protective."

“I see.” She replied slowly, as her mind linked together implications at the rate A-Xian had jumped from idea to idea.

A boy named A-Yuan, adopted by Lan Wangji. Whose safety he worried about, even in his own home. She couldn’t help a smile, though it made Tan-daifu look at her strangely. It was good to know that one of those A-Xian tried to help had made it.

*There was a child in the Burial Mounds?* Qin Su was aghast.

Jiang Yanli allowed the recollection of her visit to Yiling to explain as she turned to Tan-daifu. “Is Hanguang-jun injured?”

“Ah.” Tan-daifu stared of down the path, his expression somewhere between regret and wistfulness. “It was brave of you to ask for help. Many do not, even here.”

Only a few days after her encounter with Lan Wangji, Jiang Yanli returned to Lanling. Though Qin Su would have benefited from more time with Tan-daifu, there was little more they could do from afar. The key to removing Jin Guangyao from his position was evidence. The only evidence she would find in the Cloud Recesses was gossip — and Lans did gossip, if less openly — about how frequently he bowed just so Zewu-jun would hold his hands.

Even Jin Guangyao had to slip up sometimes, as he had the day Qin Su learned the truth. Overheard conversations that lead to witnesses or evidence left by a less careful collaborator.

Upon her arrival, Jiang Yanli sent an invitation to Jin Guangyao for tea before she had so much as unpacked.

“I am pleased to see you looking so much better.” He dimpled, but without the usual eager-to-please act. Because he had no reason to think he needed to ingratiate himself with his wife. Or perhaps he was merely too exhausted, the dark purple bags under his eyes the only sign something was off.

“You still look tired, A-Yao.” Jiang Yanli held her sleeve out of the way to pour cups of scalding hot tea. “Was Zewu-jun called away too soon.?”

“Ah.” He demurred, tapping the side of his cup to test the temperature. “I am still having difficulty with a few holdouts. Our vassals have largely fallen into line, save Zhai Qiaoling,” Sect leader of the Baota Zhai, one of the westernmost sects that had formed out of Qishan, “But most of the independent sects are still resistant. My cousin has not yet convinced Hua-zongzhu, even.”

Sympathy for the loss of a child seemed to have worked wonders on the gentry’s approval. But not as much as he’d hoped, it seemed.

Good. That could only make the bait more tempting.

Jin Guangyao’s lips thinned into a flat line. “Apologies, my troubles should not interrupt your recovery.”

Jiang Yanli shook her head. “Actually, I wanted to speak to you about something related. About my role in the future.”

“Oh? If you need more time away, I would understand.” He took a sip of now-drinkable tea.

“It’s not that. In fact, I will go mad if I remain idle any longer.” She stroked the side of her teacup, a nervous gesture of Qin Su’s. “However, there is one duty I’m afraid I cannot fulfill.”

Jin Guangyao took her hand in his. Jiang Yanli did not snatch it back, though her skin crawled. “Please, A-Su. What is it?”

“I couldn’t bear to have another child.” She cast her eyes downward, blinking rapidly, as though to prevent tears from falling. Real tears would have been better, but anticipation was currently stronger than grief.

His shoulders fell as he exhaled heavily. Jiang Yanli read it for what it was: relief.

An innocent wife would not have. She snatched her hand back, to twist them together in her lap. “We have A-Ling to inherit, but I would understand if you want to take a second wife.”

“A-Su—”

She met his eyes, speaking more firmly, with a touch of irritation. “Please don’t insult me by implying I have not noticed you value my company, but not my body.”

“I would never.” Jin Guangyao tossed back his entire cup of tea at once.

Taking a smaller sip, she struck. “Or if you wanted to act on your feelings for Zewu-jun.”

He choked on his swallow, and Qin Su snickered. *I’ve never seen him this off-balance. Not even when his father suggested he take remedial cultivation classes with the ten-year-old disciples. Keep going, this is amazing.*

Jiang Yanli gently reminded her that the goal today was not to humiliate Jin Guangyao, merely to hand him a distraction in the form of the things he most desired. Nevertheless, she tamped down a rebellious corner of her mouth as she offered him a handkerchief. Jin Guangyao coughed into it, struggling to regain his composure.

“How did you —” His dimples twitched as he broke off, briefly at a loss for words. “Furen, I have been faithful to you. I am not my father.”

No, he was an entirely different kind of terrible.

“I’ve never doubted that. However, I’m not blind. I’ve seen the way you look at each other.” She smiled, reaching for his hand again. This time, he jerked back. “Please, A-Yao. I understand you have feelings for him. A discrete affair with one man, with your wife’s permission, would not be the same as your father’s promiscuity.”

“You really wouldn’t mind?” Jin Guangyao looked at her like she was offering him ascension, but he didn’t trust the offer. He was right not to, but he would take it anyway.

“I wouldn’t.” And that, at least, was true. “I find I have little interest in such things these days, but I respect that you do.”

He let out a heavy sigh, and closed his eyes, simply breathing for a moment. When his eyes opened, he gave a tremulous smile. “If you’re certain, thank you, A-Su. I will speak to him when he visits for the conference next month, then.”

“Speaking of the conference, I would like to be more involved in your projects, if you would be willing.”

“Really?” His mouth hung open, his eyes wide.

It thrilled them both, to know Jiang Yanli had managed to catch him off guard. Not once, but twice in the same conversation. “Your watchtowers are brilliant, and perhaps I could help to smooth the way. Not through public recognition,” she rushed to assure him. “But I am good with finance, and certain sects might be more interested to know that Lanling’s income took a hit in your father’s final years, but has already recovered under your guidance if I am the one telling them. I believe Ran-zongzhu has been struggling to recover income from several years of bad harvests?”

“That —” His jaw worked, soundlessly, before he grinned. “That would be wonderful, A-Su.”

*I didn’t know his face could do that.* Qin Su said giddily. *Maybe we can pull this off.*

Jiang Yanli smiled sweetly back, her own mask impeccable.

## Chapter End Notes

- I made the setting queer normal with women able to inherit b/c I wanted to ￣(´)＿
- I've invented a lot of minor sects since JYL's part of the story has a lot to do with politics (WWX's will of course be more action focused). Most of them won't be important, I just needed some sect leaders who weren't, like, Sect Leader Yao
- That being said, I did make a map of them because awholeintheground loves fantasy maps and enabled my thing about geography. I'll add it in the notes next chapter



# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Finding the energy to write is much harder when my work is busy (though on the other hand I might maybe finally be making progress on my PhD)

[The map I promised](#). I mostly used the county/district method of naming like in canon, except for Jiangzhou which is a former name of Chongqing

A few of the OCs from minor sects I made up are introduced in this chapter. The only ones who will be plot relevant are:

Zhai Qiaolian - Sect Leader of Baota Zhai

Qi Juan - The concubine of Sect Leader Bei, mother of his first and currently only child.

Addressed as [Qi-xiao'niang](#)

Jin Huiqing - Jin Zixuan's second cousin and friend, now married to Sect Leader Hua

I don't think there are any triggers in this one!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

There was little opportunity to begin her involvement in Jin Guangyao's watchtower project before the cultivation conference, beyond reviewing its progress. Qin Su's duties had been largely neglected during her mourning period, and so Jiang Yanli found herself buried in expense reports, disciple's lessons, and invitations to court gatherings she could not politely refuse.

Yet both lessons and parties were a surprising source of opportunity.

Though the disciples had other teachers, it seemed Qin Su's weekly swordplay lessons had been missed by all. She was greeted with excitement and enthusiastic bows.

The novice students were easy, leading them through sequences of moves as a group and having them practice specific moves on her and her assistants. Several were wards from vassal sects, but too young to be useful in politics.

With the junior disciples, however, Jiang Yanli primarily oversaw sparring matches, critiquing their performances based on Qin Su's observations.

There were three wards from landholding sects, along with several from town-based sects looking to permanently join the Jin. The rest of the class was made up of distant members of the Jin Clan, and children of the sect's cultivators and servants. Though Jin Guangyao's half brother, the one researching demonic cultivation for him, was supposed to be there, Jiang Yanli had yet to meet him.

*That's Xuanyu over there, lying on the wall.* Qin Su pointed out a figure sprawled on the wall separating the training fields from the gardens, one arm behind his head while he shielded his eyes from the sun with a book. *I supposed Jin Guangyao didn't push him into cultivating more because it kept the clan from using him to supplant him. But it seems there's more to him than just a lazy flirt.*

A-Xian had been perceived that way, once. Mo Xuanyu was likely more dangerous than he appeared.

On the field, a gangly girl sidestepped the thrust of an older boy, flicking her sword across his abdomen to sever the tie of his robes. He reversed his grip on his sword — at which Qin Su groaned — and swung for her legs. The girl jumped onto the blade, using the momentum to flip over his head and land behind him. By the time he swung around, his outer robes gaping open, her sword was at his throat.

Zhai Xia, the second daughter of Zhai Qiaolian, Jin Guangyao's main opposition among the vassal sects, had once again defeated the heir of Lieshan Du.

Qin Su laid out her critique as the students' friends whooped and jeered, and the clique of Jin stalwarts tittered amongst themselves. Jiang Yanli had been pleased to learn the child of one of the most obnoxious Jin aunties was in the former group. She had never believed parentage determined destiny, but the poisonous atmosphere of Lanling seemed to spread like incense in a closed building. It was good to see that wasn't always true.

"Excellent work, Zhai-er-guniang. You're learning to use your agility in your favor, but watch your grip when you feint. If Du-gongzi had caught your blow, your sword would have gone flying." Zhai Xia nodded sharply, sweeping up her sword to run through moves. She turned to the boy. "Du-gongzi, I see your old habit has returned."

Du Fengyi grimaced, hunching over as he rubbed his arm. Not in anticipation of what Jiang Yanli would do, but of his best friend.

Xia Jiayi, the Du's first disciple, slapped him on the bicep. "See? I told you Jin-furen would notice!"

"Da-shijie!" He whined, elbowing her in the stomach before she could dance out of reach.

"Well maybe if you listened to me *or* Jin-furen, you would stop losing to a twelve-year-old." Xia Jiayi waved a finger ever closer to his face until he narrowly avoided being bopped on the nose.

"I'm fifteen." Zhai Xia, second daughter of Zhai Qiaolian, Jin Guangyao's main opposition among the vassal sects, propped her fists on her hips indignantly.

"Same thing." Du Fengyi and Xia Jiayi waved her off with a dismissive flap of their hands.

"Ahem." Jiang Yanli reminded her students of her presence.

Simultaneously, they swung their hands forward to bow. "Sorry, Jin-furen."

“Please, settle this on your own time. I’d like to watch a few more matches before the end of class.” All three sheepishly retreated into the line of watching disciples, though she was only gently reproving.

As the other students trickled away at the end of class, Zhai Xia bounced up to her, clasping her hands behind her back as she rocked onto her tiptoes. “Jin-furen! When will you spar with me again?”

*That* was proving to be a problem. To spar with the juniors, Jiang Yanli would need full control over her sword, including the ability to manipulate it from afar. But whenever she tried, something sparked along her meridians, and Chunsheng clattered to the ground. It took half an hour for her qi to flow properly again. Longer to be able to use the sword.

“I’m afraid I only have time for our weekly classes right now.” Jiang Yanli gave her a stressed smile. In one sense, it was true. She doubted the mountain of reports would ever shrink to nothing.

“Is it because Zaza won’t support the watchtowers?” Zhai Xia surprised her by jumping right to the correct conclusion. Astute, for a teenage political novice, though not enough to predict her true intentions.

“The watchtowers will be a topic of debate at the upcoming conference.” She admitted with a sigh. It was fortunate that Jin Guangyao enjoyed plotting out the details of conferences. Jiang Yanli could easily plan an event at Lotus Pier, but she’d been content to let him plan Koi Tower’s after her marriage. And she was equally content to leave the tedious work to him now.

Zhai Xia played with the ivory tassel on her sword. “It’s not that Zaza doesn’t like the idea, but they doesn’t trust Jin-Zongzhu. And they won’t agree to more of the Jin Sect in Baota.”

“It could be argued that Baota Zhai is more capable of manning its own watchtowers, due to it’s unprecedented recent growth.” Jiang Yanli agreed. It was true, would give Jin Guangyao what he wanted in the short term, and — if played well — could be used to accuse him of favoritism in the long run, given that all the independent Sects save the Hua would *need* disciples from a great sect to keep their watchtowers fully staffed.

“I’ll tell Zaza to talk to you.” Zhai Xia grinned excitedly. “And then you’ll have time to spar with me!”

Well. One of those things was good.

*...We’ll try the sword-control array again before bed.* Qin Su decided for the both of them.

The garden receptions of summer court were always preferable to winter. Indoors, there was no escape.

Jiang Yanli had expected attending court to be a chore, as it had been for Qin Su. The array of distant Jin cousins had been grating before she died - the decent ones had married out, or spent most of their time on night hunts. The competent-yet-shady ones were kept busy with sect duties, attending only from time to time.

It was the gossips who spent gold like water who made court their domain. Making it near impossible to isolate visiting diplomats who might have something useful to say.

She had been in the process of convincing Zixuan to cut off the cousins' unlimited access to the gold supply when he became sect leader when...

Jiang Yanli tossed back a cup of tea, and wished it was lotus wine.

Court was still a chore, but to a lesser extent than she'd expected. The Jin cousins had not improved, though there did seem to be less of them. Jiang Yanli wondered if she had Jin Guangyao to thank for that.

*I'm not going to thank him.* Qin Su was thoroughly disgusted at the prospect.

"...and that's how I learned that the best Tie Guanyin only arrives with the An brothers once per year." Her absolute least favorite of the Jin uncles finished up a story involving blatant misuse of sect funds. For the sake of one of the most expensive oolong teas around. "You know, I heard it can bring up a person's mood, after a tragedy. Perhaps you'd like to share a pot with me."

Qin Su's anger sparked her blood pressure.

Thankfully, her least favorite Jin auntie arrived as a much-needed distraction.

Jiang Yanli forced a smile. "Thank you for the well-wishes, Shushu. Ayi, Shushu was just telling me about a tea he had imported from a region far to the south. I thought you might like to try it. Tie Guanyin from..., which mountain in Anxi was it, Shushu?"

Predictably, Ayi grabbed him by the ear. "Jin Guangzhao! I knew it was you who bought up all the merchant's supply!"

*The entire supply? Not even our treasury can stand that on a regular basis.* Qin Su grumbled.

Did Jin Guangyao not limit their spending? Considering the expenses for his infrastructure projects, that was unsustainable.

She wondered if she could convince Jin Guangyao to cut their allowances if she pointed out the problem in front of his beloved Lan Xichen. From there, it would be easy enough to shift the cousins' displeasure onto him. Once or twice in her first life, Jiang Yanli had stepped in to stop the cousins from bullying him. From the number of times she'd heard the words *that jumped up whore's son* floating around, they didn't seem to have stopped.

The cousins were too lazy and unimportant to actually overthrow him, and would drive the sect into the ground if they managed it. It would be like a pin prick, as Jin Guangyao wove a

tapestry. A distracting annoyance that could provide Jiang Yanli with opportunities to find the right loose threads, and unravel it all.

Besides, it would be satisfying to watch in a way Jiang Yanli would never admit to anyone who didn't live in her head.

Jiang Yanli slipped away to a quieter corner as the uncle was threatened with dismemberment, should he fail to relinquish his tea.

Qi-xiao'niang, the concubine of Sect Leader Bei, was seated under an awning, gently rocking her baby. She had been a pleasant surprise. As Jiang Yanli sank into the table's open chair, using a handkerchief to wipe her brow, she looked up and smiled sweetly. "Would you still say this is refreshing compared to the Bei clan?"

"Believe it or not, yes. The servants here don't regularly upend dishes into my lap at dinner. I can handle a few gossips." A concubine's child herself, her cultivation, looks, and polished demeanor had nevertheless been enough to cement an alliance between the Bei and Qi sects.

Yet Qi Juan had been sent away with her infant while Bei-furen attempted to produce an heir. Though she would not say it outright, it was out of jealousy.

*Qin Su had met Bei-furen once. She sneers to cover up that she has no idea what she's doing. Qi Juan would make a better sect leader's wife. And she's his favorite. Though Bei-zongzhu was a friend of Jin Guangshan. She's better off here.*

Jiang Yanli covered her mouth to laugh. "Easy for you to say. They're not trying to rob you blind."

"I think that's Xiao-Heng's doing. He cries anytime they come near. It works wonders."

Whether Qi Juan would prove politically useful remained to be seen, but it was nice to have something like a friend. Neither Jiang Yanli nor Qin Su had had many before.

The cultivation conference arrived in what felt like no time at all. And with it, her son.

The Jiang delegation arrived early, so Jin Ling could be safely settled into his rooms before the first evening's banquet was in full swing.

Her brother swept up the stairs in ornate robes that matched the texture of Sandu's sheath, his posture rigid, glaring at the world in general with such intensity anyone who met his eyes would believe it was intended for them. Two columns of teenage disciples followed him — the few older cultivators who survived the massacre of Lotus Pier in their absence always remained behind to keep things running — trying to imitate him. The result resembled a pack of eager puppies.

The young boy with one fist clenched tightly in A-Cheng's robes was far more adept a mimic. A-Ling looked very much like A-Cheng had at his age, with hints of Zixuan softening

his features. Jiang Yanli started forward without thinking, her arms parting to embrace them both.

Only Qin Su's cry of panic stopped her from ruining everything. *A-Ling's always shy when he comes back. Just give him a minute.*

She hid her hands under the draping cuffs of her sleeves, so no one could see her nails digging into her palms. She could hold A-Ling, if she waited. Even if he thought he was hugging his aunt, not his mother.

"Xiandu. Jin-furen." A-Cheng bowed sharply, and slightly too low first to Jin Guangyao, and then to her. To her eyes, A-Cheng looked exhausted. But no one else living would have thought him anything but put together. He nudged A-Ling, who looked up at him with his lower lip stuck out. "Greet your aunt and uncle."

A-Ling mumbled something unintelligible and nodded his head, inching behind his uncle's leg.

With a sigh, A-Cheng dropped to one knee, placing his hands at A-Ling's elbows. "What did we talk about?"

"Be good or you'll break my legs?" Who taught him to pout so grumpily?

It must have been A-Cheng, of course.

He groaned, mirroring his nephew's expression. "No, the other thing."

"Don't talk about A-Song?" Jin Ling shouted. Qin Su flinched. A flicker of movement at her side indicated Jin Guangyao did as well, but Jiang Yanli's eyes were glued to her son.

"Not that either!" Jiang Cheng let go with one hand to swipe a hand down his face. "Your aunt has..."

A-Ling's eyes widened with realization. "Shenshen has missed me extra, so I should hug her! Shenshen!" He turned on his head and glared. The same way A-Cheng did when he got louder, because he was feeling shy.

Jiang Yanli went down on her knees and held out her arms. "A-Ling!"

Her son shuffled into her arms.

"Shenshen!" A-Ling exclaimed again, his small arms squeezing tight. Her heart ached, even as one of its missing pieces slotted back into place. Jiang Yanli felt like she was being torn into pieces and blessed, all at the same time.

She scooped him up with an exaggerated groan of effort, placing him on her hip. In her own body, A-Ling would already have been too big, but Qin Su's let her pick up her son.

"No hug for your shushu?" Jin Guangyao asked, spreading out his arms.

Jiang Yanli's arms tightened around A-Ling automatically.

"Ah." He folded his arms back into his sleeves. "In a minute, then."

Every time she was forced to watch Jin Guangyao interact with A-Ling, she would come a step closer to stabbing him with the nearest dining implement. This was unsustainable.

*Could we make it seem like A-Ling would be safer at Lotus Pier? This isn't the first time Jiang Wanyin has taken him away out of worry.*

She wanted nothing more than her son at her side, not to miss a single moment more of his growth but... Qin Su's suggestion had merit. It wouldn't take much. The mere illusion of danger, and A-Cheng would spirit him away.

That led her back to the other problem at hand: her baby brother was right there, and she wasn't allowed to hug him.

Not for a very long time yet.

*Unfortunately, he dislikes me on principle.* Qin Su's tone was wry, yet apologetic. *Which seems fair, given...*

Who she'd married.

*No, it's not you.* Jiang Yanli thought back. *A-Cheng's just like that.*

Qin Su snickered as A-Ling nuzzled sleepily into her collar, now that the excitement had faded. "I think it's time for this one's nap."

A-Cheng nodded. "Two of my disciples will stay behind to guard A-Ling's rooms after I leave."

"A-Ling already has guards." Jin Guangyao's left dimple twitched.

"So did Jin Rusong." Jiang Cheng pointed out, his gruffness verging on violence as he pulled himself up to his full height.

Jin Guangyao was unfazed. "We have already increased security."

Jiang Yanli and Qin Su both would feel better if it were further increased, by someone who had not murdered a child. "A-Yao, I think a little extra protection couldn't hurt. Perhaps we could send guards in return when he returns to Lotus Pier, so A-Ling has a few familiar faces in each place?"

"Yes, that seems... reasonable." Jin Guangyao spoke through gritted teeth, but never stopped smiling.

On the way to Jin Ling's rooms, Jin Guangyao and Jiang Cheng were waylaid by Lan Xichen, and so Jiang Yanli was able to spend a short amount of time alone with her son, as she put him to sleep.

*(If one does not count disciples hovering over your shoulder. Qin Su commented, as the designated Jiang guards practically breathed down her neck.*

Jiang Yanli did not.)

Lan Xichen had arrived the day before. He'd disappeared into Jin Guangyao's chambers, and hadn't left until late morning. As more guests began to arrive, he hovered behind him like he was restraining himself from wrapping his arms around his shoulders. Until Jin Guangyao insisted he go mingle. Even as he spoke his one of his own disciples, he continued to cast glances at him from across the room, unable to hide a giddy smile.

In the absence of a crowd hunt, the opening banquet served to promote camaraderie among the sect leaders. Jin Guangyao often used these events as an opportunity to sway sect leaders to his side. When conferences were held at Lanling in the past — before Jin Guangyao's ascension to Chief Cultivator, but after their marriage — Qin Su had played a more innocuous role as hostess.

What Jiang Yanli was doing appeared the same, on the surface. When Qin Su's father let her go with a pat on the head, oblivious to anything different, she carried a bottle of wine towards Sect Leader Ran.

Along the way, she passed Mo Xuanyu holding court at the lower Jin tables, gesticulating widely as he regaled enraptured disciples from the Kong, Luo, and Shou sects with what seemed to be a tale of Jin Guangyao's Wen infiltration. A young man in the pink robes and turquoise jewelry of the Kong Sect leaned into his space, a wine jar at the ready to refill his cup.

It was Jiang Yanli's first real glimpse of the demonic cultivator, and all it told her was he was skilled at working a room. With little golden core to speak of and half his face hidden behind a mask, he still commanded attention.

*See? He's a flirt.*

Jiang Yanli disagreed. He was a Jin. One with Jin Guangyao for a role model, and a more respectable background. So long as Jin Guangyao had a use for him, he'd have as many boys as he wanted vying for his hand.

*A political flirt who raises the dead in his spare time is still a flirt.*

Jiang Yanli choked down a laugh. *All right, I concede. You're right.*

At her approach, A-Cheng broke away abruptly from his conversation with Sect Leader Ran, engaging Sect Leaders Yao and Ouyang together in conversation. A drastic measure, confirming her suspicion that he was avoiding further conversation with her, as well as Jin Guangyao.



If only he could know the truth.

“Jin-furen, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Ran-zongzhu was a grandfatherly man with only a few wisps of white hair still clinging to his skull and a face deeply etched with laugh lines. His back had bent with age, until he was drowning in the bright green of his robes. He and his immediate southern neighbor were the only sect leaders remaining who remembered a time before Wen Ruohan came to power.

She unplugged her bottle, and refilled his cup. “I was so sorry to hear the blight affecting so many fields in Wugang was not dealt with as you hoped.”

“It’s a travesty. That Yao Sect is supposed to have a technique to chase away blight, but ever since the Sunshot Campaign, they’ve been useless.”

Qin Su scoffed. *Yeah, because Sect Leader Yao is a useless meathead without the cultivation to back it up. He never learned it, so neither have his disciples.*

“It’s not my place to judge how my elders run their sects.” She demurred, but did not bother to hide the smile that showed she wholly agreed.

Sect Leader Ran laughed, and coughed into his fist. “Not many of your generation are so respectful. Still, it doesn’t help my sect, or our lands.”

“If I might make a suggestion?” She refilled his cup again.

“Please.” He said, and tossed it down, coughing again after he swallowed.

“Perhaps a few watchtowers would help reduce —”

“Those useless things?” He cut her off, his scoff a concerning gurgling noise in his throat.

“What a drain on resources!”

Thankfully, Qin Su had helped her plan for that reaction.

“I can see how you would think that. After all the beneficiaries often cannot pay the regular fees.” Jiang Yanli summoned all the skills she’d learned from a lifetime placating the infamous temper of the Violet Spider. “To my surprise, we’re finding that the opposite is the case. Not just here in Lanling or in Laoling, but in Baling and Lieshan and Hengshan as well. All preliminary results, of course, but promising.”

“What do you mean?” His mouth twisted upwards until his wrinkles overtook his eyes.

“A village along the coast was attacked by a kelp yao just after our first watchtower was constructed in the area, and the cultivators in our local watchtower were able to spot it.” Only one of many such cases. As terrible as Jin Guangyao was, he did have innovative ideas. “The villagers were grateful, and gave small tokens of thanks.”

“As expected, only a small gain.” Sect Leader Ran gestured dismissively with his cup, forcing her to quickly right the bottle mid-pour.

“Oh, not at all.” She rushed to correct him, difficult as it was to speak coherently while Qin Su giggled incoherently in her head. “You see, this village has long suffered from similar attacks. It made fishing and trade difficult. But with our cultivators to defend them, their income doubled this year. Their share of the taxes has already increased substantially.”

He stroked the remnants of his beard. “Hmm. You have other examples?”

“Preliminary ones, yes. I can have the reports sent to you.” She offered.

“No. Even if it did work, staffing and funds would be a problem.” He sighed, his shoulders slumping as the air of good humor he’d been putting on evaporated. “Those watchtowers of Xiandu’s would never get off the ground in Wugang.”

“Perhaps you might find it useful to speak with Su-zongzhu then.” Jiang Yanli suggested, though she would prefer no one to ever speak to him again in his life.

Ran-zongzhu harrumphed. “That blundering upstart.”

“Ah, yes. He is unpleasant.” A much milder statement than Qin Su’s *he deserves to be drawn and quartered, and the parts buried separately*. Her resentment for Su Minshan was older and deeper than her son’s murder. “I simply meant that he’s worked out a funding deal, where Lanling gets a share of the profit until building costs and manpower are paid off.”

“I would never consider this if it wasn’t for the blight.”

“I would simply have to find a more clever argument.” She offered him the rest of the wine bottle.

He took it, contemplating it like it held all her secrets. “Your husband is lucky to have you, Jin-furen.”

He most certainly was not.

As Jiang Yanli continued her rounds, a commotion in the form of Nie Huaisang erupted at the Chief Cultivator’s table.

“San-ge, you promised!” Nie Huaisang threw himself over the table to hang off of Jin Guangyao’s shoulders.

Shou-zongzhu, who Jin Guangyao had been talking to, immediately removed himself from the situation.

Tinged slightly purple from lack of air, Jin Guangyao peeled Nie Huaisang’s hands away and held him at length. “Huaisang, I said we’d talk *after* the conference.”

“Many people have already gone to sleep. Aren’t you just putting me off until tomorrow?” He whined, spinning to throw himself at Lan Xichen. “Erge!”

Lan Xichen deftly caught him before he, too, could be strangled. “I think we can take our leave now, don’t you?” He exchanged a glance with Jin Guangyao, and they seemed to come

to an agreement. “Come along, A-Sang. We can speak in private.”

Nie Huaisang stashed several wine bottles in his sleeve on the way out.

Qin Su, who did not have to keep her composure in front of the leading minds of the Cultivation World, cackled.

Jiang Yanli looked away, hiding a snicker behind her sleeve, and caught the eye of Qi Juan.

The woman she was beginning to think might become a friend rolled her eyes and raised her cup silently to Jiang Yanli. Despite sitting with his arm around her, Bei-zongzhu did not notice.

Her other important discussion of the night was with Sect Leader Zhai.

Jin Huiqing had brought one of their cats, and had Sect Leader Zhai cooing over it with them. A fox-flower cat with tabby markings, it looked smug at the attention.

“A-Su, you look much improved.” Her deceased husband’s friend — and Qin Su’s biological cousin — smiled warmly.

“Thank you, Huiqing. Zhai-zongzhu.” She bowed to them both.

“How is my daughter doing, Jin-furen? No more security issues, I hope.” Like her cultivation technique, Zhai Qiaolian’s words were pleasant on the surface but cut from the shadows.

Qin Su threatened to retreat, as she had done less frequently since their return. *Make them stop.*

“None, now that the He sect is gone.” Qin Su had learned from experience that Zhai Qiaolian respected those who did not pull their punches. “Zhai Xia is a pleasure to teach.”

“Don’t lie to me. My A-Xia is a precocious little pest.” Zhai Qiaolian’s tone implied they would not want her to be anything else. “What’s her current streak in beating that Du boy?”

“I shouldn’t say.” She hid her mouth behind her sleeve and turned to look slyly at them out of the corner of her eye. “Twelve in a row.”

*That girl is a menace, but she’s also my favorite student.* Qin Su said.

Jiang Yanli was in agreement. Both her brothers were utter menaces, and she loved them all the more for it.

With a pleased nod, Zhai Qiaolian settled back into scratching the cat’s chin. It purred, unbothered by the noises surrounding it.

“You had more than pleasantries in mind when you approached.” Huiqing noted.

“I was wondering if Zhai-zongzhu might listen to my thoughts on the Watchtowers.” She admitted.

“I’ve heard all of Xiandu’s arguments before, but I’d be willing to hear yours.” Zhai Qiaolian nodded as they handed the tabby back to its owner, giving her their full attention. “My daughter said you suggested an interesting angle.”

Jiang Yanli listed the benefits of the watchtowers for the people, as well as the sect. She and Qin Su had spent hours preparing the case.

Yet Zhai Qiaolian was unswayed. “You see, the problem is I simply don’t trust his intentions.”

This was not unexpected. With a strong heir, a prodigy second daughter, and three promising younger children, rumors said Zhai Qiaolian was looking for a way to remove their obligation to Lanling. Anything that suggested ceding power back to Lanling was unacceptable.

So Jiang Yanli offered up what they wanted on a platter. “The Zhai Sect has a unique position for negotiation among our vassals.”

For the first time, Zhai Qiaolian looked intrigued. “Are you implying Xiandu might be willing to loosen his hold on the Zhai Sect, to strengthen it on others?”

Jiang Yanli smiled slyly. “My husband would greatly appreciate your participation in the program. I believe we could work out favorable terms.”

“People are not usually so straightforward with me.” They hummed thoughtfully.

“Qiaolian. You’re known for sneak attacks. What do you expect?” Jin Huiqing teased, scratching the tabby’s ears.

Zhai Qiaolian rolled their eyes, but did not disagree.

*I hear these two used to hate each other.* Qin Su mused.

They had, but those few days around Jin Ling’s first month celebration had changed things for many people.

“You understand why I cannot endorse watchtowers in Fengyang, yes?” Huiqing continued.

“Of course. Your husband cannot appear to be under the thumb of the Jin Sect.” Jiang Yanli replied.

“Perhaps one day. I’ve heard worse ideas.” They sighed. “However, I *would* like to hear how the project is going, along with the latest in Lanling gossip while I’m here.”

“Tomorrow?” She suggested. “I think I’ll retire for the night. I’d like to check on my nephew.”

Jin Ling was sleeping peacefully, his Jiang sect guards reporting no disturbance. And yet it was not only Qin Su who remained uneasy. It would be harder to keep A-Ling at Koi Tower than she'd thought.

She turned the corner towards her own building, and a blue and gray blur knocked her on her backside.

## Chapter End Notes

Fun fact! Fox-flower cats (or Dragon Li in English, cool name either way) are one of the oldest domesticated cat breeds

Qin Su's sword, Chengsheng (春生) means spring life. Characters from Welcome Rain on a Spring Night by Du Fu

Zaza is the term I'm currently using for nonbinary parents. It's English not Chinese characters, since I can't find a reference for a Chinese term for nonbinary parents, though something probably exists in Taiwan. If anyone has a suggestion, please let me know!

Also, when I use they pronouns the difference is meant to be written, not verbal, since there's no verbal difference between pronouns in the language they'd be speaking

Also also, what I've formally studied in Chinese history is mostly modern and secular, *and* I'm not Chinese myself, so I welcome corrections on culture!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

Jiang Yanli finds a new co-conspirator, and makes an unexpected discovery. At least three separate sect leaders contemplate having Sect Leader Yao assassinated.

## Chapter Notes

For the purposes of this AU, Nie Mingjue's head is not sitting out in the open in a room Qin Su has access to, because then there would be no fic.

**Warnings:** someone is tricked into drinking, self-harm as a distraction (non-POV)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“A -Su ! I’m so sorry!” Lan Xichen grasped her hands to pull her to her feet. “I wanted to give you a gift, not a bump on the head.”

He was flushed, his eyes bright and manic, his forehead ribbon dangling around his neck. His soft gray geometric patterned outer robe was hanging off one shoulder, revealing the pale blue inner robe beneath. Jiang Yanli felt strangely like she should offer to give him his privacy.

Though they were outside. In the courtyard of her house.

Jiang Yanli felt entirely uninjured, but perhaps she had hit her head after all, and was merely hallucinating the impossibility of a discomposed and rumpled Lan Xichen. “Lan-zongzhu...?”

“Erge, wait!” Jin Guangyao sprinted towards them from the direction of the guest rooms. He stumbled to a halt, doubled over and panting. “You shouldn’t talk to anyone while you’re drunk, remember? Let’s not repeat the Moling incident. Come on, let’s get you to bed.” He grabbed Lan Xichen’s wrist and tugged, but the taller man didn’t budge.

“But I haven’t given A-Su her thank you gift yet.” Lan Xichen looked around, wide eyed and innocent. “Where did the rabbits go?”

Jin Guangyao sighed loudly. “We don’t have rabbits here, Erge. This is Lanling, not the Cloud Recesses.”

“But rabbits are the best gift. Wangji and A-Yuan both think so.” Lan Xichen pouted for a moment, then perked up. “Someone must have rabbits in town.”

Jin Guangyao’s face convulsed.

Lan Xichen nodded decisively. Dropping his sword so it hovered in the air, he tried to climb onto it. Combined with the alcohol, Jin Guangyao pulling on his sleeve was enough to unbalance him, so he fell backwards into his lover’s chest. Jin Guangyao stumbled backwards, but managed to hold him up.

Lan Xichen hummed, tugging on his arms to pull him closer. He seemed to have entirely forgotten his goal, content to remain where he was.

Stymied in his efforts to steal his lover away with minimum embarrassment, Jin Guangyao turned his head towards her. “Erge overindulged by mistake, my apologies. I will get him to his rooms — my rooms, I suppose, shortly.”

“None needed. I was merely startled.” Startled, yes, but also having the time of her life. Doubly so, considering the incoherent gibberish of Qin Su’s thoughts.

“Erge, it’s nearly midnight. You wouldn’t want your uncle to know you stayed up past nine, would you?”

“But Shufu is in the Cloud Recesses. He doesn’t like crowds.” Lan Xichen said as though revealing a great secret. “Wangji is somewhere in Qishan. He doesn’t like crowds either.”

“I could always write him a letter. ‘Lan-Xiansheng, I am sorry to inform you that Lan-zongzhu has taken liberties with the disciplines. Please have him copy the rules with the novices for the next month.’”

“A-Yao, you wouldn’t.” Lan Xichen let his head loll back against Jin Guangyao’s shoulder - somehow without tipping the shorter man over — and stuck out his bottom lip.

“I wouldn’t.” Jin Guangyao confirmed, his expression turning ridiculously sappy. “Please come back with me anyway?”

“But I haven’t thanked A-Su properly yet!” Lan Xichen grasped her hands and squeezed tightly, earnestly shaking them up and down. “Thank you, A-Su! I will take good care of our A-Yao.”

She doubted Lan Xichen would ever have mentioned it, if he wasn’t drunk.

“My *deepest* apologies for this.” Jin Guangyao grimaced, his cheeks flushed pink. He turned to face Lan Xichen, cupping the back of his neck and stroking the front of his throat with his thumb. “I’ve arranged to have dessert delivered to my room. I’ll feed it to you, if you’re good.”

Lan Xichen perked up, dropping her hands and —thankfully — dragged him away before she and Qin Su could be subjected to anymore unwanted details of their relationship.

As they vanished from sight, headed for a discrete side entrance to Jin Guangyao's room, Jiang Yanli felt a twinge of guilt. Lan Xichen did not deserve to be shackled to a man who had killed his own son.

But she did not feel as much guilt as she would have liked to.

Because she had told Lan Xichen the truth, and he had chosen to do nothing.

Jiang Yanli had gone to him after she learned what she'd slept through in the aftermath of A-Xian's defection, after Luo Qingyang left the sect and Lan Wangji slipped away unnoticed. After A-Cheng left for the Burial Mounds without her. "A-Xian did not do this unprovoked. The Wen siblings saved our lives, at great risk to their own."

He smiled in appeasement. "Be that as it may, he killed the guards, and took away all the prisoners. You must understand what this looks like."

Jiang Yanli's patience had been hanging by a thread, and the patronizing *you must understand* snapped it. "I remember starving, terrified, dirty prisoners dressed in rags being used as target practice." She laughed, a short, crazed thing too like A-Xian's. "Oh, but you prefer to forget things that might upset your precious peace. Even if it dooms innocents, or breaks your brother's heart."

Lan Xichen stared at her, and Jiang Yanli remembered she was supposed to be the level-headed, soft-spoken one. No matter how little she felt it. "My apologies, that was uncalled for. It is simply that my brother cannot do anything, without your support."

But Lan Xichen only shook his head regretfully. "Both my sworn brothers have sworn to me that only dangerous prisoners were confined to the camp. I'm sorry, Jiang-guniang, but I cannot."

Lan Xichen had not believed her. And perhaps he had doomed A-Xian. Perhaps it would have changed nothing. But for what she had done — was doing — to Lan Xichen, she clung to her rationalizations.

*What just happened?* Qin Su asked.

*We just experienced the reason why Lans are forbidden to drink.* Strange that Lan Xichen would get drunk like that, though. Thanks to A-Xian, she knew the Lan's rule about alcohol was really because of the main clan's low tolerance, but —

*But I've seen him drink before.* Qin Su's confusion was like bubbles popping on surface of her mind.

Jiang Yanli had too. A-Xian once mentioned a trick Zewu-jun used to burn it off, while he was deep in his cups and reminiscing longingly about how cute Lan Wangji looked when



drunkenly attempting to straighten his crooked forehead ribbon. Had Nie Huaisang switched their cups by mistake? A prank, perhaps?

Where *was* Nie Huaisang?

Jiang Yanli pushed open the door to the Fragrance Hall and froze.

*That answers that question.*

Nie Huaisang swore as a device he was holding up to the mirrored portal to the treasure room rebounded towards his face, using both his hands to force it back to the surface. There was a focused intensity to his expression that Jiang Yanli had never seen before, a far sight from the whining puddle who'd dragged the Chief Cultivator from his own banquet.

But then, she'd never paid him much attention. No one had, save perhaps A-Xian. "Nie-zongzhu. Is there something you need from the treasury?"

Nie Huaisang startled, glaring with a focused intensity that vanished so quickly she might have imagined it, as he threw himself back from the portal. He sprawled inelegantly on the ground, covering half his face with his fan. "Is that what it is? A treasury? I really didn't know."

*Is it just me or is that bullshit?* Qin Su did the mental equivalent of narrowing her eyes.

Jiang Yanli shut the door behind her. "So you didn't just hide a talisman-engraved device you were using to inspect the wards up your sleeve?"

*If Nie Huaisang is competent, I think we can safely say everything I thought was wrong. What will we discover next? Does my father remember my birthday? Has Yao-zongzhu been possessed by a gossip-loving spirit for years?*

"I was just curious, I don't know!"

She supposed he'd never bothered to come up with another line because this one had worked for his entire life. "Let me satisfy your curiosity then."

He gave an exaggerated wail as she grabbed his wrist. But whatever else Nie Huaisang might be, he was not strong. Jiang Yanli was able to easily pull him through the portal. He stumbled against her, and, as she reached to steady him, bit her hand.

"Ow! What was that for? Are you a dog?" She demanded, wiping off her knuckles on her outer robe.

"You made unfounded accusations and dragged me in here!" He slumped inward, making himself look smaller. "I don't know why! I felt unsafe."

Sure he did. "You wanted to see inside. Now you're inside. Take the chance or leave it."

He took it. "Well, if you insist. There *is* some interesting art in here. Is *this* where the paintings of the Crimson Swan ended up? Tragic. I could help display them properly, if San-

ge gave me half a chance. But no, it's too soon. Half the sects would throw a fit, and Lan-xiansheng would kidnap me for remedial schooling. I can't go back to the Cloud Recesses! I simply can't!"

Qin Su snorted. *At least some things stay the same. He's still annoying.*

Jiang Yanli watched Nie Huaisang dart around the room, peering at items on shelves and lifting curtains in what seemed to be no particular order, keeping up his narration all the while. "You know, the Wen really had some gems in their collection. This poetry collection is priceless, and yet here it is, tragically gathering dust — Oh, dear."

His arm knocked into an ornate vase that had been placed too close to the edge of a display.

Jiang Yanli plucked a talisman from her sleeve and threw it, so it hit the vase, freezing it in place tipped halfway off the shelf.

Nie Huaisang turned, squinting at her with an air of smug satisfaction. "You're not Qin Su."

*Nie Huaisang of all people notices? That's it, good night. Wake me when things make sense again.* Despite her words, Qin Su remained alert and attentive.

Jiang Yanli tamped down on the urge to throw another talisman, this time at him. "That's quite the accusation."

"Qin Su would have reached for her sword when I knocked over that vase. You stopped it from falling with a talisman. Also, she never calls me Nie-zongzhu." He perched on a vase-free table, his hands folded perfectly, but one leg bounced to the rhythm of his thoughts. "The question is, are you possessing her, or are you using one of Xue Yang's human skin masks?"

"Neither." She held up Qin Su's sword, and drew it. "Do you deny that this is Chunsheng?"

"So that is Qin Su's body, but you say it's not a possession. Hmm. Did Wei-xiong find a way to permanently inhabit a living body?" Nie Huaisang jumped disturbingly close to the truth with his second guess. "Are *you* Wei-xiong? But no, Wei-xiong wouldn't have chosen a nice woman like Qin Su."

*Aww. He thinks I'm nice. So long as he's just a sneak, I forgive him for the deception.*

"I'm definitely not A-Xian." Jiang Yanli realized her mistake even as it slipped out. She clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes widening.

"Jiang Yanli!" He cried, delighted. "Oh, I have to know how this happened."

"I don't know what —"

"No, don't protest. You've been caught. But don't worry. I'm certainly not going to tell anyone in Koi Tower about you. What would be the use of that?" Nie Huaisang was positively gleeful, and she didn't trust him for a second.

Qin Su didn't disagree, but sighed. *Unfortunately, I think you'd better tell him.*

“Take a seat.” She hung up a talisman to alert her if anyone approached the portal, and checked under every curtain, just in case. Once she was certain the room was secure, she knelt across from him. “You were correct that it was A-Xian’s work that made this possible, but it was not his doing.”

“Obviously, it was Wei-xiong’s invention. His most powerful imitator is Xue Yang, and he has the creativity of a sea slug.” Nie Huaisang sank gracefully to his knees, balancing his fan across them. Seeing him now, a stranger would never guess his reputation. “Now, who is this mysterious benefactor? Do tell.”

She briefly detailed the mechanics of the array. From his performance in the Cloud Recesses, she would not have expected him to understand it, but he nodded along without interrupting. “Qin Su found the wrong journal at exactly the wrong moment. Now I’m in her body, and she lives in my head.”

*Was it the wrong moment?* Qin Su wondered, and digressed before Jiang Yanli could contradict her. *Insult his fan for me, that’s sloppy work. His mountains still look like Jin Guangyao’s hat.*

Dutifully, Jiang Yanli repeated her words.

He gave a startled laugh. “Ah, Qin Su has long been my worst critic. Sadly, this revenge business leaves little time for developing my painting skills.”

“Revenge? Does this have anything to do with why you were trying to break in here?” If so, his grudge could only be against —

“Naturally. Jin Guangyao killed my brother.” Nie Huaisang asserted this claim as though it were common knowledge. “He also set up yours, which seems relevant.”

Jiang Yanli stiffened, lightning racing through her veins. “A-Xian? Didn’t he lose control?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I can’t be sure, I wasn’t there.” He said lightly. Jiang Yanli was beginning to believe he was allergic to acting serious. Dropping this on her as though it didn’t shake her entire worldview. “He is, however, the reason Jin Zixuan went to Qiongqi path that day.”

Jiang Yanli could have sworn she heard a dizi playing as she died, when Chenqing was hanging loose in A-Xian’s grasp. But she had been dying — that memory was not to be trusted. And just how clever would Jin Guangyao have to be to plan all of that? Surely not everything that had gone wrong could be laid at his feet.

*Maybe we should consider the possibility anyway.* Qin Su, for whom all the greatest cruelties of her life could be laid at the feet of that same man, suggested.

Jiang Yanli was uncertain that knowing would do anything more than make their losses hurt more. She sat in stunned silence for a long moment, and wished for a plum to let her retreat and reset. A reply to Tan-daifu’s latest letter was overdue, she thought hazily.

*Tan-daifu would say that the truth helps.* Qin Su seized the chance to turn her own nagging about Tan-daifu's advice back on her, which didn't seem fair.

But the truth would only help if she was ready to face it. Jiang Yanli still woke every day expecting to see A-Xuan beside her, was thrust back into sepia-tinged memories of afternoons on the Lotus Lakes at the distant sound of adolescent laughter.

She would not be ready until the day she saw A-Xian again.

*What day? Yanli-jie?* Qin Su asked, but Jiang Yanli was uncertain why she'd thought that. A-Xian was dead. She could not simply trade someone else for him.

"How did you learn this?" She asked, finally.

Nie Huaisang looked up from a book he'd snagged from a nearby shelf while she was lost in her thoughts. "I have my ways."

"You have spies."

He picked up his fan to flick it dismissively. "Just a few informants. Mostly, we Nies are simply very good at out-drinking people."

She had a feeling he was downplaying the extent of his network. "What else have you learned from your spies?"

"I just ask people to keep an eye out, it's hardly espionage." He insisted.

"Sure." She said, seeing this was a hill he would die on.

Mollified, he continued. "Jin Guangyao also killed his father."

"I'm aware. Shockingly, I'm not actually upset about that one." Perhaps Nie Huaisang had finally run out of shocking revelations.

But no, he had another left in store. "Who is? No, the interesting part is he left a witness. A little bird told me that somewhere in Koi Tower, there's a woman trapped in a hidden room."

Jiang Yanli would never get used to having to sit side by side on the Peacock throne with Jin Guangyao. She had been meant to share it with Zixuan, as not only his wife but his equal.

She hadn't expected her husband to want her as anything other than the mother of his children. Not until their second engagement, when his earnest, awkward attempts at wooing her had turned to learning each other over the course of honest conversations that slowly grew less stilted. Finally, their words had begun to flow like a mountain stream thawing in spring, and Jiang Yanli knew her heart was right to choose him.

A-Xuan had listened, and confided he needed her help, not only with things like courtesy and public speaking, but in knowing what needed to change.

Jin Guangyao, she thought, was so certain that he was the smartest person in the room, that he didn't notice his wife-slash-sister was an entirely different person.

Qin Su had nearly always sat in silence during conferences, listening perhaps half the time as she thought about lesson plans and inspected the attendees' robes and ornaments in case anyone had discovered a talented new artisan. So for the moment, Jiang Yanli did the same, albeit paying the debate her full attention.

No matter the length at which Sect Leader Yao complained about issues that did not remotely involve him (Gusu's high land tax rates), internal sect matters not on the conference agenda (how a small temple sect and town sect on his lands kept driving yao and gui into each other's territory), or were entirely out of left field. "See! There's proof! The Jiang have been hoarding the Yiling Patriarch's inventions for themselves!"

A-Cheng, who had just reached the point in his status report regarding Yunmeng's taxes, blinked. Clearly used to Sect Leader Yao, he didn't even get angry, merely rubbed his knuckles against his forehead. "The Jin have all of Wei Wuxian's heretical writings. I explained this last conference. And the conference before that."

Sect Leader Yao continued to prove himself the least astute cultivator in the room. "But you've never let anyone into Lotus Pier to check for themselves!"

At that, the flush of anger filled his cheeks. But in an impressive-for-him show of control, A-Cheng only snapped, "What, exactly, are you insinuating, Yao-zongzhu? Would you like to share Xixia's cultivation techniques with the class?"

"I see that Yunmeng's recovery is continuing ahead of schedule. Let's move onto..." Jin Guangyao blanched, as he realized who was next. "Qinghe. A-Sang, if you please."

Nie Huaisang got to his feet, looking around with what she had to assume were faked nerves, clutching his fan close to his chest. He stuttered through the beginnings of his presentation, before swaying and kicking a bird cage hidden beneath his table into the center of the room. It spoke, in a disturbingly accurate imitation of A-Cheng.

And all right, that was entertaining. But mostly, the conference continued to star Sect Leader Yao.

At least today, A-Ling was perched on the wide throne beside her, making it a little more bearable.

Leaning into her side, his tongue caught between his teeth, A-Ling scribbled on each new sheet of paper. Ostensibly, he was practicing his calligraphy. And he did do a bit of that, with messy strokes, but only when he noticed her looking down. Mostly, he scribbled blobs that he proudly declared were all the dogs he would someday own, when she asked.

Black flecks of ink spattered the front of her robes, but Jiang Yanli could not bring herself to care. She'd missed so much. She'd take every second with her son she could get.

Jiang Yanli's continued efforts to pay attention were stymied by Qin Su's running commentary on everything from the tackiness of the gilded everything to the dust bunny that had attached itself unnoticed to Sect Leader Ouyang's beard, taking the chance to say everything she'd never been able to.

*It's a shame I never tempted Ouyang-zongzhu's tailor away. He doesn't deserve her. And oh, look, Su She's imitating the Lan more obviously than ever. It's almost like he sold them out to the Wen or something and misses the status.* The off-white and teal blue of Su She's robes were at most a single shade away from Lan colors, and the wave embroidery on his hems was suspiciously cloud-like.

The most notable detail of Su She's presentation was the way the Lan disciples — save, of course, for a slightly off-color Lan Xichen — pretended not to snicker as he claimed the peasants in his lands were superstitious about musical cultivation.

She'd ensured Sect Leader Ran was next to him, and noted the two of them speaking quietly during one of Sect Leader Yao's disruptions. This time, he was one insult away from starting a cat fight with Sect Leader Tang, over some minor territorial dispute. Jin Guangyao actually got up and went over to them to smooth ruffled feathers, though his efforts were stymied by A-Cheng's utter apathy over whether his young, hotheaded vassal stabbed Sect Leader Yao in the eyes with her chopsticks.

*It's not a cultivation conference if no one tries to murder Yao-Zongzhu. Someday, someone will take one for the team and actually do it.* Qin Su sighed wistfully.

From the way Jin Guangyao's dimples twitched when he returned, he'd contemplated it.

During their break for lunch, Sect Leader Ran approached the Peacock throne. As she'd expected, he asked directly for a meeting with Jin Guangyao to negotiate terms for the implementation of watchtowers.

Sect Leader Zhai's approach was more surprising.

"Xiandu, Jin-furen." Sect Leader Zhai bowed to each of them. "I would like to request a private meeting with both of you before I leave Lanling. Jin-furen brought up some interesting points yesterday that I would like to discuss further."

"Both of us?" Jin Guangyao was a man who planned everything himself, who seemed to believe that seeking a second opinion meant smiling and nodding and then explaining why the other person was wrong.

The implication that his here-to-fore apolitical wife had made a better offer appeared to have broken him.

"I think that could be arranged." Jiang Yanli said. "A-Yao?"

He recovered quickly, gesturing for his assistant to put a note in his schedule. "Yes, of course. I believe tomorrow, immediately after dinner would be an ideal time."

“Excellent. I look forward to it.” Sect Leader Zhai bowed again and turned away, without waiting for their dismissal.

Tempers frayed in the afternoon, and Jiang Yanli had to pass A-Ling off to his minders for a nap. As Sect Leader Yao rose for his actual turn to report, Nie Huaisang made his move.

He screeched, jumping to his feet as though bitten, and bumped into Sect Leader Yao hard enough to knock them both to the floor. The wine jar in his hand shattered, sharp edges lacerating his palm. He stared at the cuts for a long moment as they began to bleed. And, clutching his wrist, he drew in a deep breath, and howled.

The majority of the room promptly began to find their teacups or the nearest tacky golden peacock drapes utterly fascinating. But his elder brother’s sworn brothers were at his side in an instant.

“A-Sang, please. Let us see.” Jin Guangyao pleaded.

*I think Jin Guangyao really does care about Huaisang. He’s never going to see him coming.* Qin Su said, and they both winced at a particularly high-pitched cry. Nie Huaisang should have been born to a theatrical troupe.

“Oh, that looks —” Lan Xichen caught only a glimpse of the injured hand before he had to let go to avoid Nie Huaisang’s wildly swinging other arm.

“Ergeeeeeee,” Nie Huaisang wailed. “I’m bleeding out aren’t I? You can say it.”

“No, no,” As Jin Guangyao finally captured the flailing hand, Lan Xichen pressed down on the wound with his own handkerchief. “You should see a healer, just to clean and bind it properly.”

“Will you take me?” He sniffed, his eyes wide and filling once again with tears as he looked between the two men.

Jin Guangyao exchanged a pained glance with his theoretically secret lover. “I can’t leave right now, can you?”

Lan Xichen shook his head. “I’m scheduled to speak on our findings about suppressing ghosts summoned with spirit flags next.”

“Right. Right.” Jin Guangyao stared into the distance for a moment. Qin Su hoped he was watching his plans for the conference crumble before his eyes. “Huaisang, you’ll have to go with one of your disciples —”

Nie Huaisang sobbed harder.

That was her cue.

“I’ll take him to get patched up.” Jiang Yanli offered, already striding towards them.

Jin Guangyao looked around at the determinedly apathetic audience, then back to Nie Huaisang. He sighed. "Thank you. A-Su will take good care of you, please let her take you to a healer."

Nie Huaisang kept up his whining until they were out of sight and earshot of the hall, though still under an awning away from the downpour outside. Then, with a glance around to make sure no one was watching, he plucked a vial of salve and a bandage out of his robes. He only asked her to pop open the salve, but she took it and the bandage from him, gesturing for him to hold out his hand.

"I can do it myself." He insisted, the vapid act vanishing in an instant.

Jiang Yanli rolled her eyes. "Bandages are more secure when someone else wraps them. It'll help stop the bleeding." Cultivators were always such babies about receiving help.

"All right." He gazed at her with wide and uncertain eyes. As though no one had offered to help him without something in return, or a fit of hysterics, in a long time. Yet even as she finished tying of the bandage, that incongruous seriousness took over once again. "We have at least until the end of the evening banquet, though it would be better if you returned for that. The house should be near the kitchens, in what looks like an empty space."

They walked back and forth past the kitchens several times, but found nothing. The hems of their robes were soaked from the rain, the line between wet and dry creeping higher with every step.

"Right. Of course it wouldn't be that easy." He pulled one of A-Xian's Compasses of Evil out of his pocket. "Only Demonic Cultivation could hide a building like this, but it must be shielded somehow, or people would notice a cluster of resentment in the middle of Koi Tower. I wonder... hold this."

He thrust his umbrella into her chest, expecting her to hold it over his head. Bemused, she did so.

"A lightning talisman, perhaps, to imitate the effects of Zidian." He mused, sketching in the air with his injured hand as though it didn't pain him. "Yes! It's this way."

As they walked, she watched him closely. "I had no idea you were so..."

"That I'm in possession of a working brain? Yes, I prefer it that way." He said brightly.

Being underestimated had its advantages, but that didn't stop it from hurting.

"I was going to say that I thought you didn't cultivate beyond the basics." Jiang Yanli corrected. "Cultivation has no bearing on intelligence. I would know."

"Yes, I suppose you would. I've always preferred talismans to sword cultivation, much less those horrible life-draining sabers, despite Dage's wishes. Did you think Wei-xiong was only friends with me for my sense of humor?"



She hadn't spent much time thinking about their friendship at all, not when she was occupied watching A-Xian fall in love.

*What sense of humor?* Qin Su said. Teasingly, so Jiang Yanli repeated it, earning an insulted gasp.

But Nie Huaisang's methods bore fruit, his compass leading them to their destination.

From the outside, the building looked like a shed. One of the many near-identical buildings that housed tools or out of use decorations, albeit with an unusual amount of space on either side. But when she looked closely, Jiang Yanli glimpsed a shimmer of golden energy, mixed with writhing shadows. Wards, and made from a combination of resentful and spiritual energy at that. No wonder neither of them had so much as glimpsed it before.

Jiang Yanli stepped forward to inspect the wards in detail. They looked to be designed to hide the building, and keep someone in. Though the details looked overly complicated for concealing a single person, she and Nie Huaisang agreed. Keeping anyone who knew it was there out would require a level of intricacy that risked collapsing the entire ward every time someone passed through.

Their presence would not be detected.

Still, Nie Huaisang stepped through first, claiming, "I can talk my way out of this, if we're wrong. You, on the other hand..."

When Jiang Yanli stepped through, there was a wave of disorientation, like stepping onto solid ground after hours on a boat. It passed, and a two-story pavilion of modest size stood before her. Far less elaborate than her own, she thought it might once have been used to house servants, before it was repurposed into a prison.

Keeping out of sight of anyone who might look out, they approached the open windows on either side of the door. Jiang Yanli plastered herself to the wall, and peered inside.

She and Nie Huaisang had agreed that if they found the woman's prison, they would only scout from the outside.

But what Jiang Yanli saw through that window changed everything.

A young woman in linen servant's robes knelt at a table, her shoulders hunched over as she methodically ground herbs into powder. A text depicting the anatomy of a human body was open to her left.

The woman looked up, and Jiang Yanli was certain she was seeing a ghost.

We're getting so close to Wei Wuxian coming back, which I've been so excited to write since I figured out how it would happen!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

Wen Qing gets some surprise visitors, Qin Su gains a new ability, Jiang Yanli has a minor crisis of morality, and Nie Huaisang is just here to wave his fan around and make plans

## Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** Captivity, and some discussion of its effects; Brief trauma flashback; murder planning

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Qing knocked the mortar and pestle to the ground as she jumped to her feet, the red-orange powder scattering across the ground.

Belatedly, Jiang Yanli realized she had stepped into view.

“Who are you?” Wen Qing demanded, reflexively reaching into her sleeve for a needle. She came up empty. “This is a warded house. You can’t be here.”

Wen Qing was wan and pale, like the sun had not touched her skin in long years. Dark circles ringed her eyes, though cultivators could manage on little sleep. A woman for whom the nightmare of their youth had never ended.

“I -” Jiang Yanli’s voice caught, and she pressed her hands to her throat. Her umbrella dropped to the ground, and the downpour rapidly soaked her through. “You’re alive.”

“How did you get through the wards?” She demanded again, scrutinizing Jiang Yanli as though trying to place her.

*She must be wondering why a Jin is happy to see a Wen alive.* Qin Su cut through her shock.

Her thoughts inched into motion, like wading through the muddy shallows of a lake after a long day in the unforgiving sun.

Of course. Wen Qing was not trying to place Jiang Yanli, but Qin Su, who she had never met. She should say something, to allay her fears. Something, anything to explain. But she could do nothing but stare at those suspicious eyes, in that impossible face.

A stirring of air against her neck heralded Nie Huaisang's arrival at her side. "Wen Qing? Now this is a surprise."

Wen Qing laughed, harsh and rough, like she hadn't had reason to in a long time. "Six years in the same rooms and I've finally lost it. Nie Huaisang is *not* standing outside my prison."

"Nie Huaisang *is* standing outside your prison." He swept his fan outwards, giving a shallow bow.

Wen Qing considered this, and let her shoulders slump. "Ok, then. Who are you?"

Jiang Yanli hesitated.

*Maybe you shouldn't have this conversation out in the open. What if a servant comes by with dinner, or something?* Qin Su suggested, gently coaxing. Jiang Yanli was reminded that though she usually thought of her like a shimei, Qin Su had been a mother. And from how the young disciples ran to her excitedly, trusting and curious, she had been a good one. However acerbic she might have become, Qin Su still had a good heart.

Qin Su flinched, and closed herself off even as Jiang Yanli gathered herself together. And so she did not hear Jiang Yanli wonder if the same could be said for her.

"Before I say, may I come inside? If anyone comes by..." She glanced over her shoulder, and saw a servant dash past, carrying a lidded tray, unprotected under the rain.

Wen Qing studied her, and Jiang Yanli stared back, unblinking. Finally, she sighed.

"You might as well. But I'm not making you tea." Wen Qing agreed, shockingly apathetic. Though Wen Qing had often pretended indifference, it had never felt like she meant it before. Now, she accepted an apparent stranger with unknown motives entering her room like it was nothing.

Once, in the calm before the storm after the Sunshot Campaign, A-Xian had joked that if someone tried to kill him, it would be the most interesting thing to happen that week. When he saw how distressed the idea made her, he'd rushed to assure her he didn't *actually* want to be assassinated, and never repeated the sentiment. But it had been the truest thing he'd said in those months.

In spirit, this felt the same.

"And you're going to sit on a towel." Only as Wen Qing spoke did she realize rivulets of water were dripping from her hem and sleeves, and the pins in her hair dragged heavily at her scalp.

In her own body, Jiang Yanli would have spent the next week lying fevered in bed at least. Now, she would simply have to change before returning to the conference.

Reaching into a cabinet, Wen Qing retrieved not one, but an armful of towels, and lay them out as Jiang Yanli maneuvered herself over the windowsill. As she retreated to her desk, Jiang Yanli dripped her way into a seat on the towel across from her.

Nie Huaisang perched on the windowsill, one leg hanging outside. He, unlike her, had remained mostly dry. “I’ll keep watch,” he said, though he posed like he expected to model for a painting.

But then, maybe Wen Qing was his witness, and he was lying. She couldn’t be sure. The fact that they were both liars did not mean he would be honest with her.

“Explain.” Wen Qing demanded, folding her arms and setting her jaw in a way that did not scream willingness to listen.

And there was the question. Was it safe to reveal her identity? Was it any more dangerous to tell Wen Qing she was Jiang Yanli than Qin Su? If there was a chance she would tell Jin Guangyao, either would crumble her nascent plans, and she’d be lucky to flee to Yunmeng with her life.

Yet she did not believe that Wen Qing would ever be won over by Jin Guangyao’s act.

Well. Wen Qing had always appreciated bluntness. She’d grown up in a snake den, and could smell deceit from a mile away. If Jiang Yanli wanted Wen Qing to trust her, there was only one option.

“I’m a dead woman in a living woman’s body. This,” She gestured at her face. “Is Qin Su, Jin-furen. As for me, you once sheltered my brothers and I at your Wen Ning’s request, and it cost you everything.”

An inscrutable collection of emotions passed over Wen Qing’s face, settling on anger. “That isn’t po—” She cut off, jerking back.

“So you know it *is* possible.”

Wen Qing’s brows narrowed further. “Prove it.”

And — that was a problem. Nie Huaisang had caught her in a slip of the tongue. That would not work with Wen Qing. She couldn’t say which stories A-Xian might have told her, or which might have entered common knowledge. She and Wen Qing had been friendly, but not close. “It’s not well known that you helped my brothers and me. But if anyone was actually listening...”

“I did,” Nie Huaisang volunteered, grimacing as he once again admitted to possessing knowledge. “I imagine your late husband’s friends do as well.

*These are trying times for him. Qin Su, who had been slowly emerging, surfaced fully to say. If people know he uses his brain, they might expect things from him.*

Her guard frayed from recent revelations, Jiang Yanli giggled aloud. “Sorry, Qin Su said something.” *And I’m sorry to you as well*, she told Qin Su, though she could read the feeling within her.

Qin Su’s exaggerated good humor deflated. *I can’t keep running away from him — from the memory of my son forever.*

“A joke at my expense, no doubt.” Nie Huaisang tilted his head back to rest on the frame, his mouth curled upwards.

“Did you say Qin Su is within you? But —” Wen Qing snapped her jaw shut.

“That’s not how the array works? Yes, I noticed that. Nevertheless, here we are.” Her hands fisted in her soaked robes, replacing body-warmed fabric with the cold drape of her skirts. Shivering again, she forced her hands to let go, and smoothed out the fabric. “But you wanted proof.”

Wen Qing nodded sharply, retrieving a worn, threadbare red pouch that had been hidden behind the pile of books. She clutched it in her hands.

Jiang Yanli had not, yet, thought of anything truly conclusive to offer. “Anyone could guess we mostly spoke about our brothers, under the circumstances. I must confess those days are something of a blur, thanks to my fever.”

“That doesn’t prove your identity, no.” Wen Qing agreed shortly, but Jiang Yanli barely registered her tone.

The open book to Wen Qing’s left was new, a half-labeled diagram of a person’s meridians on the page. A still wet brush and bowl of ink sat nearby. She didn’t recognize the herbs that had spilled from the mortar, despite her experience in both cooking and field medicine. But the stack of thin volumes with deteriorating bindings were too low quality for even a non-cultivating Jin servant to purchase.

Yet she had seen their like in Koi Tower before.

“Quite the quandary,” Nie Huaisang shifted to put a hand behind his head, his other reaching out to brush the finally slowing fall of rain.

Perhaps not. “Those tattered journals — You’re the one who’s been transcribing A-Xian’s work, aren’t you?” Wen Qing’s eyes widened, and she knew she was correct. “Would it convince you if I read one?”

“His journals may as well have been written in code for all Jin Guangyao and his minions can make sense of it.” Wen Qing shifted on her knees, her posture losing its perfection in a way that somehow conveyed challenge. “I suppose it would. I haven’t worked through this one yet.”

Selecting a volume from the middle of the stack, she held it out to Jiang Yanli.

She took it with trembling hands, wary of which of A-Xian’s secrets she might find within. Flipping it open, she found lotuses. “He tried to grow lotuses in the Burial Mounds?” She asked, but Wen Qing remained impassive.

Jiang Yanli would gain no sympathy, without sufficient proof. “This describes his attempts to grow less-hardy crops in lands tainted by resentful energy, beginning with the ‘noble lotus’, because ‘as Shijie always said, lotuses are a vital part of any diet, and radishes are rabbit

food.” She couldn’t help but smile, almost able to hear A-Xian say those words. Certain, for the space of a breath, that if she turned, he would be standing behind her, grinning and no older than ten. “I definitely never said that last part.”

Lotuses; however, *should* be a part of any diet. They were, objectively, the best vegetable. Less popular in seafood-loving Lanling than Yunmeng, unfortunately.

A-Xuan’s pond had been maintained, but only as a memorial. No one who truly knew them had been involved in that decision.

“He predicted lotuses could only tolerate a certain level of resentment, and calculated that the levels of the patch of land must be reduced by 60%. He played Chenqing to draw out spirits bound to the plot and — there’s a drop of spilled ink there— the bound spirits willingly moved on.” She turned the page, hoping to find the missing link. “Oh. This is.” There was an unusually detailed piece of artwork filling the next page, depicting Wen Ning and a boy who must be a younger Lan – no, *Wen* – Yuan elbow deep in a muddy pond of lotuses in full bloom, Wen Qing with an overflowing basket of laundry on her hip, watched them fondly. Smaller figures were grouped together in the background, bent over in the fields, or sitting together over the mending.

*This* had been the Burial Mounds they all so feared.

“What is it?” Wen Qing asked.

Wordlessly, Jiang Yanli turned the book towards her.

Wen Qing took a shuddering breath, and looked away.

It was a reminder, Jiang Yanli realized, that Wen Qing was the only one left.

Except that she wasn’t. “The boy, A-Yuan. He’s alive.” She said, breathless. “Lan Wangji adopted him. No one else would have guessed, but...”

To her, it had been obvious.

Wen Qing met her gaze, disbelief warring with naked hope. “You’re not lying. And you’re really —”

“I can cook for you if you need more proof.” She smiled, looking down at her hands. “The servants would get a shock out of Jin-furen in the kitchen.”

*Soup-making is not a required skill for Qin cultivators.* Qin Su said. *I could not be trusted not to poison myself.*

Only the basics had been required of the Jiang. But Jiang Yanli had taken to it, latching onto the skill instinctively. A young girl who had finally found *something* she was good for, beyond a marriage alliance.

“Jiang Yanli.” Wen Qing breathed, her lips parting as her grip on her needle tightened.

The sound of her name on Wen Qing's lips felt like a warm embrace, though Wen Qing had never touched her in anything but a professional manner. The first time she was recognized by someone who mattered to her before everything went wrong.

She shivered, but not from the cold.

Concerned, Wen Qing got to her feet. "I've changed my mind. Since you're not a stranger or a lying impostor, I will make you tea." She slapped a heating talisman on a cast iron teapot with a peacock motif emblazoned on the side and turned to grab a folded robe from a nearby cabinet. The robe, she handed to Jiang Yanli. "And put this on, or you'll catch your death."

She held the robe away from her body. "I won't. While many of my problems carried over into my new body, my health ones did not."

"How did I never notice you're just as bullheadedly stubborn as your brothers?" Wen Qing sighed. "Wei Wuxian told me he invented his drying talisman to hide the evidence when he pushed Jiang Wanyin in the lake, but he never figured out how to make it work while someone was still wearing the clothing."

*Letting her will be faster and less suspicious than going back to the Fragrance Hall to change,* Qin Su pointed out.

They were both right, but — since when had accepting help become so difficult?

Maybe she was just like her brothers, when she wasn't spending all her time as their moderating influence. "I *am* a Jiang. But I appreciate the gesture." She hurried behind a folding screen to change, and attached the offered quick-drying talismans.

When she stepped back out in Wen Qing's robe, she said, "I have some questions."

"I can guess them." She poured a cup of tea for Jiang Yanli as she knelt on a fresh, dry pillow.

Jiang Yanli cradled the cup close to her chest, savoring its warmth. "I missed much of what happened while I was -" shell-shocked and unable to summon the expected wailing sobs, terrified for her brother, while still hoping Zixuan would walk through the doors, and it had all just been a big mistake — "attending to my husband's mourning rites. You turned yourself in?"

"They promised Wei Wuxian and my clan would live if A-Ning and I turned ourselves in, and then killed everyone except us." What might have been a broken, bitter laugh tore from Wen Qing's throat. "Though I don't think Jin Guangshan ever knew about me, since his son used me to make his heart give out."

"What on earth made him think it was a good idea to keep you around?" Nie Huaisang asked. "Meant in an entirely complimentary way of course."

Jiang Yanli grimaced. "What Nie-zongzhu means ask is—"



“Exactly what he said. It’s fine.” Wen Qing rolled her eyes. Nie Huaisang awakened Jiang Yanli’s eldest sibling instincts simply by existing, so perhaps Wen Qing was experiencing the same phenomena. “They wanted A-Ning as a tool, to figure out how Wei Wuxian made him, and how to control him. Me, well — there’s no one else in the world who knows more about golden cores.” She wasn’t bragging. The woman who had kept Wen Ruohan in a semblance of stability for years and kept company with the Yiling Patriarch had no need for boasting. “My familiarity with Wei Wuxian’s work was merely a bonus, he said, though he’s gotten more out of my translations than his original goal.”

“His original goal?” Jiang Yanli took a careful sip of tea. It was a rich golden color, with the fermented taste of a pu’er, of mushrooms and dried fruits and honey. Wen Qing had left the box out, and its label read Qishan, and a date two decades earlier. A purposeful reminder, then, of everything Wen Qing had lost.

A tea or a wine might age into readiness, but Wen Qing lived on borrowed time.

“To strengthen his golden core.” She said. Knocking back her own tea like it was wine, she poured another. “A lack of proper instruction and years with a fake manual left his stunted. Of course, I’m his prisoner. I’d prefer he stay that way. So he doesn’t trust anything I come up with.”

“Greedy.” Nie Huaisang said, “*Meng Yao* would never have kept you around.”

“If Jin Guangyao erred, it’s our gain.” This time, when Jiang Yanli reached out, Wen Qing let their fingers brush before pulling away.

Shaking her head, Wen Qing continued, “If you’re hoping to use my skill against him, that would be difficult. He takes my methods and has them tested extensively before use. Especially on himself.”

“I’m certain you could find away around that,” Jiang Yanli busied her hands with the teapot to keep from offering unwelcome comfort. “But you’re A-Xian’s family. *You* are worth finding, whether or not you can be of use.”

Rather than risk eye contact Wen Qing stared at Jiang Yanli’s hands. “Though Jin Guangyao understands it’s not so easy to correct his block, he’s starting to get impatient. Now that his known enemies are out of the way, I don’t know how much longer he’ll take to accept I’d need to treat him directly to have any effect. He would never allow that, of course. I’d kill him.”

Qin Su made an offer to hold him down that Jiang Yanli did not repeat.

“Speaking of murder, did you help kill my Da-ge?” Nie Huaisang asked pleasantly.

“Unless he used something a second time, no.” Wen Qing said. Then startled, “Chifeng-zun is dead?”

Pointedly, he hummed a tune that sounded... off, somehow. When Wen Qing just stared at him, he huffed. “He used an obscure musical cultivation score.”

Wen Qing raised her chin high, and stared him down. “I am the last person anyone would ask about music. My attempts at a lullaby made A-Yuan cry. I couldn’t even clap a rhythm when Wei Wuxian needed one for his cultivation. He had to ask *Popo*. ”

Nie Huaisang did not lose his flippancy when he said, “Then you can live. Perhaps, if you’re willing to trade some information, I could do something about your brother’s situation.”

Wen Qing looked him over, calculating. Glancing at Jiang Yanli only briefly, she nodded. “I doubt there’s much you can do for me, but if you can find a way to free A-Ning, that would be worth it.”

“We came here looking for a witness to Jin Guangshan’s murder.” Nie Huaisang leaned towards them, balanced precariously on his perch.

*I’d almost forgotten.* Qin Su said softly. Jiang Yanli *had* forgotten.

“Well, I mixed the poison. But the person you came for might be upstairs. I was restricted to this floor a year ago now? Or so? It’s difficult to keep track of time, these days.” At that, Wen Qing seemed deeply disturbed. Jiang Yanli could understand why — days passing in infrequently interrupted isolation could be no less disorienting than waking up one day to find her infant son reached her waist. “Sometimes, I hear footsteps overhead.”

“Excellent!” Nie Huaisang snapped his fan closed, and jumped down outside the window. A gray flash blasted upwards a moment later.

In his absence, silence crept in. Wen Qing’s hands shook as she reached for her teacup, and she let them fall in her lap.

“I should return to the banquet soon.” Jiang Yanli said, finally. “But I am wondering. What is Jin Guangyao using to keep you here?”

One of Wen Qing’s brows quirked up. “You must have noticed the wards.”

“Yes, but they’re based on A-Xian’s work, and you know it better than anyone else alive.” And after his complicity in her family’s murder, Wen Qing must be unable to overcome his means on her own.

“If it was only those wards, yes.” Grimly, Wen Qing pulled up her sleeve.

An inky blackness ringed her wrist, a chain of distorted characters that wavered before her eyes. Unthinking, Jiang Yanli reached out to touch, but the characters dissolved and scattered up her arm as her fingers connected with warm skin. There was an intake of breath, and Wen Qing hurriedly drew back her hand. As she did so, the characters began to creep back into place, now somehow less comprehensible to her mind. “Sorry, I didn’t think.”

“It’s fine.” Wen Qing refused to meet her eyes. “This is evidence, I think, of the only time Jin Guangyao lowered himself to personally research demonic cultivation. Wei Wuxian filled dozens of journals with his inventions and theories and half-baked ideas he dreamed up at

three in the morning. But he never would have come up with anything like this, and Xue Yang couldn't have managed it."

"What does it do?" She asked, certain she wouldn't like the answer.

"If I take a single step out that door, A-Ning will not only die again, but his soul will be shredded." At that, Jiang Yanli gasped. Wen Qing's face crumpled. "They — they kept him for experiments. Like he's nothing more than a mouse."

"Oh, Wen Qing." Jiang Yanli wanted, instinctively, to hold out her arms, and let Wen Qing fall against her shoulder. But she knew better than to offer. Wen Qing hunched inwards, clasping her arms at the elbows.

A thump from outside the window startled them, but it was only Nie Huaisang, resuming his perch. "There's a woman upstairs. She didn't notice me. But you, Wen-guniang, must have much more interesting information."

"There's a problem with that." Wen Qing had straightened her posture while Jiang Yanli was turned away. Unwilling to show Nie Huaisang weakness, where she'd let some of what she was feeling through when it was only Jiang Yanli. "You can't come back here. Not when Jin Guangyao is in Koi Tower, at least."

Jiang Yanli thought she might have a solution. "Are you familiar with A-Xian's papermen?"

"The ones he pranked the Lans with back in the Cloud Recesses? Of course, but he never had cause to use them in the Burial Mounds. I don't know the talisman."

"I do. Here, let me demonstrate." Once, her mother had confined A-Xian to his room for a month, and for the week it took her father to decide the punishment was too harsh, the talismans had been their only contact.

Jiang Yanli borrowed a talisman paper, since her own were ruined by the rain and cut out the shape of a paperman. She focused, but the world didn't swirl down into a mouse's perspective. She registered the empty feeling in her mind at the same time as the paperman twitched, and stood. "Qin Su?"

The paperman nodded. *<This is weird>* Qin Su's voice said, as though from a strange distance. Wen Qing and Nie Huaisang startled.

"You can hear her?" She asked, breathless.

Wen Qing stared, open-mouthed at the tottering paper figure "You said she was still around but — this shouldn't be possible."

Qin Su's little paper body wobbled from the center of the table towards the edge, but before she got halfway, it fell, inert. Qin Su was back in her mind. *I lost my hold on it. Looking at a giant version of your own face is extremely disorienting.*

Much in the way seeing a face that didn't belong to her in the mirror every morning was disorienting, she imagined.

*Still, that was amazing! I need to try it again.* Qin Su continued. *I wonder how long I could last in there with practice. Just being able to move again...*

“You’re welcome to try to figure out what happened.” She told Wen Qing. If anyone living could figure out what had happened to Qin Su’s soul, and if it had affected Jiang Yanli’s, it was her.

“Another time. You said you needed to go.” Wen Qing urged.

“Yes.” She agreed. She’d stayed far too long as it was. “After you make one of your own.”

Jiang Yanli returned to the banquet in talisman dried robes, with Wen Qing’s paperman in her pocket. It was uneventful, in comparison. Her absence had gone largely unremarked. the dramatics of Nie Huaisang were universally understood to be time consuming. That she returned without him only helped sell the ruse.

That he’d been cagey about what he wanted to speak to Wen Qing about without her was less comforting.

It was another few hours before Jiang Yanli could retire for the night, but she absorbed little of the conversation.

Finally sliding open the door to her bedroom, Jiang Yanli lit the candles with a wave of her hand. The thrill that went through her at the fact that she *could* turned to terror at the sight of a figure sitting cross-legged in the middle of her floor.

Until she saw that it was Nie Huaisang. Which wasn’t entirely reassuring, but was unlikely to end in bloodshed.

“I’d appreciate if you could remove your sword from my throat.” He tapped Chunsheng’s edge.

Jiang Yanli was startled to realize she’d drawn the sword. Qin Su’s instinctive panic had bled into her, and she’d acted without thinking. Her ears rung from the force of Qin Su’s scream, visions of splattered blood flashing with each blind.

She sheathed the sword with a sigh. “I’d recommend not hiding in our rooms in the future. Traumatic experiences. Qin Su still wants to gut you.”

She was actually stuck in the panic stage, her volatile emotions ricocheting around the confines of Jiang Yanli’s mind like a coin caught in a crevice. But a part of Jiang Yanli wanted to gut him for her, a heretofore unknown bloodlust that crawled back with her from the grave.

*I think that’s just me,* Qin Su managed. But Jiang Yanli knew better. *I don’t think I could have stopped in time.*

“Yes, well. That’s nothing new! Someone tries at least once a week.” Nie Huaisang waved her off, unshaken. “Wen Qing and I came up with a brilliant idea! Just a tiny seed of a suggestion, really.”

She’d been working with Nie Huaisang for one day, almost to the minute, and he’d already begun involving her in schemes that would probably get her killed. A second time. Dragged Wen Qing into it too, as though she weren’t in a dangerous enough position already.

Rather than sit, Jiang Yanli crossed her arms, taking up a position between Qin Su’s two ink paintings. “I’ll listen, if you promise this won’t happen again. And leave, after.”

“If you still want me too!” He agreed brightly. “You should get Wen Qing out for this. The lynchpin was her idea. Very clever. I would have just found someone convenient. I’m nothing if not lazy, after all. But she thinks we can take out two birds with one stone.”

As he was speaking, Jiang Yanli had reached into the seam of her robe, and retrieved the paperman. It stirred in the palm of her hand, as though Wen Qing had been waiting for the right moment.

*<I’m flattered.>* Her little paper arms folded over one another. *<Not that you managed to say anything with all those words.>*

Nie Huaisang’s sly smile broke as he grimaced at the paperman. It returned, as he tilted his to look at her from the corner of his eye. “What would you say to bringing back Wei-xiong?”

“Yes.” The part of Jiang Yanli that crafted dark, twisted schemes for that very purpose responded before she could stop herself. She shoved it back into the dark corner of her mind where it belonged. “But the sacrifice summon doesn’t work without casualties, and I can’t —”

“Yes, that is a problem.” He agreed, at odds with his breezy tone. “Who would buy into trading their life for vengeance, and deserve to have their soul ripped apart? Or at least, that’s a problem for you. *I* care about getting the job done.”

*I miss being able to think that pleasant-seeming people were just pleasant people.* Qin Su grumbled, and Jiang Yanli wholeheartedly agreed.

Yet Nie Huaisang wasn’t volunteering himself, she noticed. “It wouldn’t be difficult to convince someone I was Qin Su, possessed by my own spirit. But unlike you, it *is* the destruction of the soul that concerns me.”

*<Would you still be opposed if the sacrifice did deserve it?>* Wen Qing interjected.

Jiang Yanli’s first instinct was to say that no one deserved that. It was even more unlikely that someone so monstrous would agree. But when Wen Qing explained her suggestion, Jiang Yanli found herself agreeing.

“You don’t want to bring your brother back?” She asked, later, after Wen Qing’s paperman lost its animation. It was not a serious offer. Though Jiang Yanli had not disliked Nie Mingjue nearly so much as most sect leaders, she could not help but think that if he had not been quite so intransigent, A-Xian might not have been driven to the lengths he had.

She would not trade her chance to bring back A-Xian for Nie Mingjue. She simply needed to know if Nie Huaisang was going to be a problem.

*You can be kind of scary sometimes, Yanli-jie.* Qin Su was likely reconsidering her stance on Jiang Yanli’s general level of bloodthirstiness.

Nie Huaisang’s eyes went wide before he sputtered into a fit of laughter more bitter than a mouthful of lotus pits. Wiping a tear from his eye, he said, “Are you kidding? Dage would murder me. Which would be worth it, except he’d immediately undo all my hard work and send himself into another qi deviation. Resurrect Dage, really.”

He tsked, and laughed again, but this time there was something wistful in it.

Longing, perhaps, for what he could not have.

“And you? You don’t want to bring back your husband?” He asked, startling her.

“Zixuan? I hadn’t even thought about it.” She had loved her husband, and lost him far too soon. But she was, she felt, *capable* of grieving him, where the place A-Xian belonged was a gaping hollow inside her. She’d practically raised A-Xian, watched him grow and change into a brilliant young man. A world of difference lay between him and the man she’d admired from afar, and only gotten to love for a single year.

There was, she thought, another key difference between them. A-Xian was like her. He’d never move on peacefully to his next life, while those he cared for were unhappy or in danger. Zixuan, on the other hand... “If I know my husband, Zixuan will have already been reincarnated.”

His soul probably belonged to a child not much younger than A-Ling now. One with doting parents and many siblings, for whom the worst thing in the world was sitting inside to memorize characters.

Or so she hoped. “But A-Xian... he’s still waiting. I’m certain of it.”

“Waiting? Not a restless ghost, or in...?”

“A-Xian’s anger never lasts- lasted. He’s always burned bright and hot. If he took revenge, that was it.” The longest grudge he’d ever held was against Zixuan. It had also been his pettiest. There had been Wen Chao, of course, but something had stopped A-Xian from getting to him faster, though he’d never told her what. Otherwise, A-Xian’s anger was like a firework: a spark, an explosion, and gone, as insubstantial as smoke. “And if the kings of hell are as quick to condemn as mortals, then what’s the use of the justice he loved so much?”

Justice that had been stolen from him in every turn in life. Jiang Yanli could only hope that this new life she might — just might — be able to offer him would grant her A-Xian everything he'd been denied in the first.

Nodding, Nie Huaisang produced a jug of wine from his sleeve, and raised it towards her in toast. "To brothers with too many morals and bringing yours back."

Qin Su spent the night practicing slipping in and out of a paperman, wobbling around on tiny paper legs and indulging in her newfound ability to move and speak, of her own volition. She lasted longer each time.

Each shift kept Jiang Yanli alert and awake, the feeling of being alone in her mind now as strange as sharing it had been at the start. Jiang Yanli didn't mind. She wouldn't have been able to sleep anyway.

Even as she hoped to see her brother again, she felt the empty space in her bed more viscerally than ever. A-Xuan would not have had advice she could use. Likely, he wouldn't have approved. Certainly, he wouldn't have understood. But he wouldn't judge her, or try to stop her. He would hold her close, stroke her hair, and give her a place where it was safe to *feel*.

Jiang Yanli hadn't known that was something she was missing, before him. It was something she would likely never have again.

The paperman Wen Qing had left lying inert on the table surged back to life. *<Oh, you're still awake. Or did I wake you?>*

"Couldn't sleep." She whispered, propping herself up on one elbow, softly enough that Qin Su — busy scaling the shelving near the door — could not hear.

*<I couldn't either.>* Wen Qing admitted. *<You gave me a lot to think about.>*

"Questions of morality?" Questions like, who was Jiang Yanli to condemn a soul to be torn apart by trickery? Who was she, if she purposefully eliminated a living person's soul, a line only Xue Chonghai had admitted to crossing? What, then, separated her from Jin Guangyao?

Qin Su had caught her wondering this, as her thoughts cycled through those questions on one of her returns, and scoffed. *The difference is you're not murdering innocents for power.*

But Qin Su's anger was scalding and freshly kindled; her own was a low, steady flame. She had the clarity to stare down the path she'd chosen, and ask where she'd draw the line, if not here.

Jiang Yanli couldn't help but wonder how much blood she'd have on her hands when the dust had settled. Whether anyone else would be able to see it.

Wondering wasn't enough to stop her.

But Wen Qing surprised her.

*<You gave me hope. I haven't had hope in a very long time.>* She took a flying leap into the air, the little paper figure drifting unevenly down from its peak to land on the bedframe, near Jiang Yanli's head. *<I'm sorry if I've caused you inner turmoil.>*

She giggled a little into her hand, surprising herself. "Turmoil. That's a good word for it. But I think — I'm glad you did."

The silence that settled between them felt warm and comfortable, like she'd just put on a broth to simmer. Like if she waited for it to be ready, maybe she wouldn't be so lost after all.

After some time, Wen Qing asked, *<Would you mind telling me about A-Yuan?>*

What she knew wasn't much. But to Jiang Yanli's surprise, she drifted off in the telling.

## Chapter End Notes

Any guesses on the sacrifice?

Another book with the dead peoples voice in the protagonist's head trope came out this month and many thanks to Arkady Martine for giving me a formatting idea to distinguish papermen speaking from Qin Su in Jiang Yanli and also for my entire life



# Chapter 6

## Chapter Summary

Jiang Yanli waits, brings Jin Ling to cat therapy, and cons a con man

## Chapter Notes

**Content warnings:** minor character death, self-harm for ritual purposes, suicide by deception (? idk if there's a better way to put that), mild body horror.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Deciding to resurrect A-Xian was one thing. Putting the plan into action was entirely another. And unfortunately, the first step rested entirely on Nie Huaisang's shoulders.

Nie Huaisang was not inclined to hurry. "I can't snap my fingers and check every little town in the Cultivation World for one little snake," he said, when she sent a butterfly to ask for updates. "I'm a miracle worker, not a god."

Jiang Yanli understood this. But it felt like she was waiting around again for A-Xian to return from the Burial Mounds. Only this time, without an anxious A-Cheng to support, she had far less patience to spare.

One month felt as long as three.

While she waited, Jiang Yanli returned to Qin Su's duties. The frequency of the garden parties had decreased, fortunately, with the changing weather and replacement of the extended family's vault access with allowances. They were, as Jiang Yanli had predicted, very upset about the allowances. Muttering about how Jin Guangyao was taking away *their* rightful inheritance

And so, Jiang Yanli did paperwork in her office. Night hunt expenses and responses to letters about the watchtowers, often with Qi Juan keeping her company. Embroidering cranes onto a plain outer robe, while her baby napped, or crawled determinedly about the floor. Qi Juan found embroidery relaxing, as cooking was for Jiang Yanli — which she still could not do, thanks to Qin Su's disastrous ability in that department — and was turning out to be very capable in finance.

She took meetings in her office now, too, with more than just the staff. The way she had convinced sect leaders to bend at the cultivation conference had been noticed, and some

wanted to feel her out. They brought small but expensive gifts and tested her ability to sidestep seemingly innocuous questions. Asked her advice on night hunting cases or local issues she knew perfectly well how to solve. On occasion, she surprised her visitor with a piece of the puzzle they'd missed, and they left more intrigued by her than they'd begun.

It was never anything that threatened Jin Guangyao. Not yet. But he'd definitely noticed.

Unfortunately, A-Ling rarely joined them. He spent his days in the novice classes, for new disciples still working on forming their golden cores. Jiang Yanli had reorganized her schedule to spend more time with him, a few more hours out of the week teaching the very basics of sword forms. It was time she didn't have. But it gave her more than just two meals a day — shared with Jin Guangyao, at least twice a week — and A-Ling's bedtime with her son.

Qin Su continued her experiments with papermen, slowly increasing the amount of time she was able to stay away. It seemed to bring her more genuine pleasure than anything else, and so Jiang Yanli encouraged her, though she was anxious when Qin Su was out of sight. She couldn't feel Qin Su when she was out of body, and it felt viscerally wrong, like something was missing.

Jiang Yanli was losing sleep over it, but with Qin Su's golden core to compensate, she could manage.

Wen Qing was a comfort. She, too, had trouble sleeping, and was often up past the time when Jiang Yanli could no longer keep her eyes open.

They spoke frequently of the little brothers they each missed, and especially of A-Xian, two of the only people in the world who truly missed him. Finally, Jiang Yanli learned how he had lived those years in the Burial Mounds, and while much of it was heartbreaking, there was joy there too. So much more than she had dared to hope for.

She told Wen Qing in turn about A-Xian's first talisman experiment. How he'd made and fastened a gigantic umbrella to Jiang Yanli's boat, so she, too, could spend the entire day on the lake when A-Niang was in a mood. How he'd tried so hard to hide his pain at every turn.

Other times she simply told Wen Qing about her day, how A-Ling had done well on a quiz, or of his difficulty focusing during quiet solitary core formation exercises. About the antics of her older disciples, and the strangest questions an envoy asked or the most ridiculous demands by the extended Jin family.

Leading the pack was a proposal for a solid gold temple on a branch clan's lands. They had heard of gold-coated temples in lands to the south that were reportedly more impressive than Koi Tower, and sought to outdo them without a thought for structural stability. Not to mention where they thought to find that much pure gold.

Jiang Yanli had informed them they could gild as many temples as they wanted on their own budget.

In return, Wen Qing told her of medical techniques she had invented or learned, far beyond the extent of Jiang Yanli's knowledge. From surgeries on clouded eyes from a land of lush river banks and imposing desert pyramids far to the west to Wen Qing's own use of acupuncture to redirect the flow of qi, enabling her excise the sort of meridian blockages that led to qi deviation, or siphon off resentful energy into the air.

Jiang Yanli had always been a good listener. But it was during those times, when she had the least to add to the conversation, that Jiang Yanli most often drifted to sleep.

She would have felt guilty, but she suspected that was Wen Qing's intention. Instead, it only made her feel lighter, to be able to speak to someone honestly, about ordinary things without them knowing her every thought.

Usually, if she'd fallen asleep before Qin Su returned, she stirred slightly as she settled back in, and drifted back to sleep.

One night, Qin Su returned from her explorations feeling confused, and darkly contemplative. Though Jiang Yanli had managed to fall asleep in her absence, while Wen Qing was telling her how adding Schisandra berries to Jiang Yanli's medication might have helped with her breathing problems, she came to full alertness as Qin Su slipped back into her head.

Something had happened.

*I thought I saw resentful energy coming from Mo Xuanyu's sleeve.*

That wasn't surprising. Mo Xuanyu had taken Xue Yang's place as Jin Guangyao's pet demonic cultivator, after all.

*But he was flirting with the Kong Sect Heir, by the fountain in the garden closest to the Fragrance Hall, it seemed, from the image Qin Su showed her, and he didn't seem to notice anything strange. He just kept blushing, and making abortive movements towards holding Xuanyu's hand.*

That was strange, she agreed. Not to mention, she'd thought he was flirting with the Luo Sect Heir.

*Yes, he was, just last week.*

Jiang Yanli had yet to meet the youngest of the Jin siblings. She would need to arrange to meet him, eventually, if he continued to prove elusive. Neither Nie Huaisang nor Wen Qing had the slightest idea what Mo Xuanyu was working on, and that could prove dangerous.

But meeting him would have to wait, because Nie Huaisang had finally found the fugitive he was searching for.

Before the sect leaders departed Koi Tower, Jiang Yanli had received a personal invitation to visit Baota for further negotiations with Sect Leader Zhai. To her surprise, she also been invited to visit the Qi Sect, in Chenggu, which had already agreed to a trial of three

watchtowers, in its most productive farming region. Jin Huiqing had also patted her cheek and demanded a visit — it had been too long, apparently.

The behavior seemed strange to Jiang Yanli, but Qin Su insisted it was normal.

She chose a date for her travels only after she heard from Nie Huaisang.

There was no question that Qi Juan and Zhai Xia would join her to visit their families, but Jiang Yanli also wanted to bring A-Ling along.

“I’m concerned about the safety risk,” Jin Guangyao said with his usual plastered-on dimples.

“I’m more concerned with the security at Koi Tower.” Jiang Yanli informed him bluntly.

And because he couldn’t just admit that he had killed his own son, he conceded.

A-Ling might be able to finally meet his dajiu, so long as he didn’t know who A-Xian was.

In Baota, Jiang Yanli prospective sites for watchtowers, and was invited to spar with Zhai Qiaolian and their wives. “Just swords, no tricks with cultivation. We wouldn’t want to steal each other’s secrets by accident.”

Jiang Yanli wasn’t entirely certain what they meant by that, but as it would not require her to have mastered remote sword manipulation, she agreed.

And lost, soundly, to two out of three. It was some consolation that Qin Su claimed she would have also lost. Unfortunately, Zhai Xia finally extracted a promise that when she returned to Koi Tower, Qin Su would spar with her.

But her performance seemed to have pleased Zhai Qiaolian in some way, and they spent her final afternoon there sipping tea under a canopy while watching the Zhai disciples showcase their skills. A-Ling watched the sparring raptly from her lap, while discussing logistics.

As they left the training field, Qi Juan grabbed her by the left arm. Her vision swum at a sudden rush of pain. She fought to keep from crying out. She peeled Qi Juan’s fingers away, and the pain began to ebb.

“Oh, sorry! Are you hurt?” Qi Juan hovered frantically.

Jiang Yanli shrugged her off. “Just a cut. I was careless while sparring with Zhai-zongzhu. What was it?”

“Zhai-zongzhu just let us see their sect’s techniques.”

Oh. *Interesting*. It was impossible to tell whether that thought came from her or Qin Su.

Her stop in Chenggu was much shorter, but she left Qi Juan with her family, claiming she would herself like to pay a visit to Jin Huiqing on her way back to Lanling.

It was, as Qin Su pointed out, a good excuse to send the guards back to Koi Tower ahead of them. If they complained at being sent away, it could be considered an insult to Jin Huiqing. They were, after all, not only Qin Su's husband's own cousin (and though it was not publicly known, her own), but her older sister's (estranged) sworn sibling.

The guards left. They would likely keep watch in Lanling, and arrange to join her as she returned to the tower to avoid censure from their sect leader. That was fine. It wasn't as though she intended to parade A-Xian back to Koi Tower.

Jin Guangyao might find out she'd dismissed the guards, if he had spies watching the city closely enough, but the guard certainly wouldn't tell him.

In Fengyang, Jiang Yanli found herself buried under a mountain of the friendliest cats she had ever met. Even A-Ling, who was loudly insistent that he liked *dogs*, deigned to scratch a few ears, after the first time a cat purred and planted itself in his lap.

As the Sect Leader was out of town on a night hunt, it proved a perfect opportunity to ask a burning question.

"What happened, between you and Qin- my sister?" Sworn siblings did not simply drift apart. "I know she's angry, but..."

Huiqing hummed, shifting the placement of one of the two cats on their lap so it was no longer seated on the other's head. "Oh, she has her reasons. Qin Xifeng would say I shirked my duty."

She followed Qin Su's lead for the conversation, as Huiqing might know her well enough to tell the difference. "Just for marrying out? For not, what, bringing Fengyang closer to Lanling?"

"No, no, though perhaps she would argue that as well. Our falling out was a matter of timing." They sighed, and missed the same cat rolling back on top of its friend. "I would have thought you would agree with her, A-Su."

*Because of my —* Qin Su shuddered *— marriage? It's not like my sister talks to me enough for me to know her opinions. A few times, she's visited Koi Tower to meet with Jin Guangyao, and I only found out after she left. Her former friends must have spent more time with me than she did, growing up. But then again --*

"My sister doesn't have fifty of the friendliest cats in the world."

They laughed. "That's true. She doesn't!"

Visiting Huiqing as Qin Su was a rather different experience from the times they, Mianmian, and occasionally Qin Xifeng had sought her out during the Sunshot campaign, when they drafted idle cultivators into doing the grunt work for Jiang Yanli's kitchens and infirmary. Or

later, during their brief tenure as first disciple, helping her gently bully Zixuan through social interactions.

She was there for no more than two days, but she felt completely and utterly spoiled.

*Is this the meimei treatment?* She asked, slightly dazed.

*Just wait until you meet my brother.* Qin Su informed her with a strange mix of smugness and exasperation. Kind of like Jiang Cheng, on a good day.

From Fengyang, she doubled back westwards, into Lieshan, meeting Nie Huaisang in a town at the base of a small mountain range. Somewhere in those foothills, there was a town that specialized in funeral goods, shrouded in blood-spattered rumors.

She wasn't thrilled at the prospect of leaving A-Ling with Nie Huaisang, but she wouldn't take her son into danger under any circumstances. Fortunately, it seemed Nie Huaisang had brought along five of his own disciples. The tallest of them, a woman almost as broad shouldered as Nie Mingjue had been, lit up at the sight of A-Ling, and immediately produced a pair of wooden swords from her sleeve. "May I?"

Jiang Yanli nodded for her to go ahead, and A-Ling was vigorously whacking the sword the woman held firm with his own before she had even exchanged greetings.

Nie Huaisang's entourage was clustered around two tables, with a spot open across from him. He was not quite the smallest of the group in height, but even the short one had more muscle mass. Yet — when Nie Huaisang asked his disciples to give them privacy, they thumped him companionably on the back, making him grimace and smile, before obeying. He led them not only because of his bloodline, but because he was *theirs*.

She placed the pot of lotus and pork rib soup she'd gotten up early to make on the table. At least in an inn, no one thought her likely to burn anything down. A-Ling had wanted to help, when she'd been slicing the roots, pouted when she wouldn't let him use a knife, and then adorably bouncy when she let him taste the results. Replacing the heating talisman that was beginning to peel off, she took a seat.

"You're *certain* this is Xue Yang? Not a local Yiling Patriarch copycat, or someone trying to bring their village notoriety?" After all, the village in question had been plagued with early deaths long before a demonic cultivator began to take a starring role.

Xue Yang would be attracted to such a place, but so would any garden variety demonic cultivator.

Nie Huaisang produced a fan just to flutter it dismissively. "Oh, it's him. No one else has the skill or ability to play with their victims the way he does."

*Oh, great. We're using an even more twisted mass murderer to resurrect the Yiling Patriarch. Fuck.* Qin Su vanished into the talisman tucked into her sleeve when she realized Jiang Yanli had heard that. She didn't get the chance to say that she understood why Qin Su, who had never met A-Xian, would be worried.

Jiang Yanli shrugged off her apprehension. “All right. How do I get there?”

“Ah. I’ll be going into the foothills with you.” Nie Huaisang said lightly — too lightly, given his promises to the contrary. “Not to confront Xue Yang, of course. I value my life more than that. But the rumors of walking corpses go far beyond what any demonic cultivator has achieved since the Yiling Patriarch. Since Wen-guniang confirmed that Wei-xiong made his Tiger Seal from some creepy sword he found in a monster’s belly...”

“What do you want with the Yin Iron?” She asked, in a pleasant tone.

If Nie Huaisang took it as threatening, that was his problem. Constant suggestions of ways to throw her baby brother into danger would not be tolerated.

A-Xian would have to help depose Jin Guangyao, because that was how the Sacrifice Summon worked, without risking whatever Qin Su had done to them both. Or leaving A-Xian trapped in a nightmare, with Xue Yang in his head. But she wanted to keep him safe, outside of situations that could not be avoided.

“Nothing! But I bet Wei-xiong could find a use for it.” He backtracked when she glared. No one was handing A-Xian Yin Iron if she had anything to say about it. “Or at the very least destroy it.”

“You were supposed to watch A-Ling.”

At that, he laughed. “Oh, no, Xiaodan is much better at keeping children alive than I am. I’m far too easily distracted for babysitting.”

Nie Xiaodan, the muscular woman, lifted her head at the sound of her name. “We’ll keep your little man entertained. He won’t have a scratch on him.”

“I’ll be very impressed if that’s the case. He’s managed to skin a knee or elbow every day of this trip so far.” A-Ling had been very dramatic about it, every time, even after she bent to his demands to kiss it better. “But isn’t it your duty to protect your sect leader?”

Nie Xiaodan did not miss a beat in her mock duel with A-Ling as she replied, though she was only watching him from the corner of her eye. “Eh, he’ll be fine. If A-Sang can sneak around Koi Tower without getting caught, he can avoid a demonic cultivator. Better to have us guard this little troublemaker, we’d only get in A-Sang’s way. Damn, your nephew hits hard. He’ll fit right in.”

Tall, muscular, and good with children — she would have been exactly Jiang Yanli’s type, as a teenager, when she secretly dreamed of being rescued and carried off to a happily ever after. Before A-Xuan returned her feelings, and she realized how much she liked that *he* liked being ordered around.

A-Ling beamed, and redoubled his efforts.

“I’d ask you not to teach him any more swears, but his jiujiu has already made that a moot point.” At least A-Ling did not yet understand what they meant, cheerfully exclaiming *shit*

when he dropped something on purpose. Getting him to stop was a hopeless battle.

Jiang Yanli supposed she had no more arguments against Nie Huaisang accompanying her. “Fine. I’m sure you’re very good at hiding.”

He beamed like she’d given him a compliment. “I am!”

From the first step into the foothills, the world felt slightly out of place. It wasn’t anything obvious. The sky was the same blue with wispy clouds as it had been in town. The dirt was dirt; the trees were trees. The grass, such as it was in the wilting autumn, was grass. But the golden haze of the afternoon sun felt more like a nightmare than a dream, and the path forward seemed like the road to hell. Nie Huaisang lagged behind, uncharacteristically silent.

*You don’t see it?* Qin Su asked.

Looking around again, she could see nothing that might have drawn her interest. *See what?*

*The fog of resentment.* At Qin Su’s nonplussed words, she received a flash of an image. A doubling of the scenery before her, but with dark, smoke-like wisps overlaying everything. It didn’t seem to be doing anything, wasn’t drawn toward them with the intent to harm. It was simply there.

When A-Xian had used demonic cultivation to control resentful energy directly, rather than through corpses, he appeared to be pulling the energy from his surroundings as well as the amulet. There were even types of ghosts that could hide, undetectable by cultivation, until provoked. Could Qin Su be seeing ambient resentful energy?

*That would explain what I saw with Mo Xuanyu, but not how I can see it.* And then, quietly. *Am I a tethered ghost?*

Jiang Yanli didn’t know how to answer that. Though Qin Su was certainly angry, she didn’t feel like any resentful ghost she had ever come across. Not that there had been many, given her low cultivation and disinterest in night hunting. She’d only been given enough practical training to be able to get away to find help if she ran into one. Perhaps A-Xian would know.

*However I’m seeing it, it’s getting thicker.* Qin Su said with an undertone of worry a few minutes later. That probably meant they were approaching the village, and Xue Yang.

Soon after, they came across a teenage girl squatting off the side of the road, picking mushrooms.

“Hello,” she said, “I’m looking for someone. Do you think you might be able to help us?”

Though her irises were almost white, she had clearly been looking at the mushrooms she was gathering. “Might be, if you tell me something about them. Who’s us?”

She turned back to find that Nie Huaisang had vanished while she was paying attention to the girl.



He *had* claimed to be good at hiding.

“Just me then. I’m a cultivator, looking for a member of my sect. He’s a young man, who favors dark colors and candy. He’s missing a pinky, and I’ve heard his laugh described as skin crawling.”

“Please tell me you’re here to take that asshole away forever.” The girl groaned.

Clearly Xue Yang had not endeared himself to everyone in this town. Likely only, mysteriously, Xiao Xingchen. “That is the plan, yes.”

“Thank the heavens, my prayers have been answered.” She threw her head back and clasped her hands together. Looking back at Jiang Yanli, she said, “No, seriously, I have been leaving offerings in the village shrine and I’ve never done that before for *anything*. I don’t know why you want him back, but please take him far, far away.”

Qin Su’s amusement bled over into her, and Jiang Yanli laughed. “I see he’s made an impression. Where is he now?”

She shrugged. “Probably bothering Daozhang while pretending to help him peel vegetables. I’ll show you.”

The people they passed in the street looked downtrodden and miserable, more than she would have expected from a town that was a bit weathered and far from wealthy, but in good repair.

*The air is chocked with resentful energy. Qin Su shuddered. That can’t be good for them.*

The girl brought her to the entrance of a courtyard, and paused.

“He’s over there. I’m gonna go be... somewhere else.” She turned on her heel and walked back in the direction they’d come.

This was it. Her one chance to bring back A-Xian. She took a deep breath, and plastered on a smile.

When Jiang Yanli entered the courtyard, she saw a man dressed all in white, with a strip of cloth over his eyes was bent over a basket, smiling at a man in black who was leaning halfway into his lap, obstructing the first man’s progress. This must be Xiao Xingchen, the celebrated disciple of Baoshan Sanren. Of whose relationship with his former cultivation partner A-Xian had not so much expressed envy, as radiated it from every pore.

Yet now here he was, smiling obliviously at the man who had ruined his life.

Xue Yang pressed a kiss to Xiao Xingchen’s cheek and burst into unhinged laughter as he pulled away. Xiao Xingchen only blushed, and kept working.

(“What?” She’d asked, when Wen Qing suggested that someone might deserve having their soul destroyed.

“If anyone deserves it, it’s Xue Yang.” Wen Qing had said.

Then, Jiang Yanli had not disagreed. And when Wen Qing had explained Xue Yang's obsession with A-Xian, she had known he was the best — no, only real possibility.

But now, she fully understood.)

Xue Yang looked up, and narrowed his eyes. He recognized Qin Su, of course, but must be surprised she would know enough of him to track him down. "Gege," He said in a disconcertingly sweet voice. "There's a pupp—"

"Shidi!" She cried out, and he paused, confused. "We've all been so worried!"

Xiao Xingchen was delighted to learn that his young companion was not quite so alone in the world as he'd believed, and immediately invited her to sit, and have some tea. Jiang Yanli was not going to drink anything that had been in Xue Yang's vicinity, of course, but it wasn't as though Xiao Xingchen would notice.

"It's a small temple sect near the border of Lanling. He crossed a group disciples from the Jin Sect by mistake, and by the time we realized what was happening, he was gone." Turning to Xue Yang, she gushed, "I'm so glad we've found you."

"Are the Jins not still looking for me?" Xue Yang probed.

"Oh, they've forgotten all about us."

"Gege, would you mind giving us a minute?" Xue Yang asked.

"Of course. I wouldn't want to disrupt your reunion." Xiao Xingchen patted him on the cheek as best he could, and took his basket of vegetables inside.

She dropped her fake cheer as Xue Yang allowed his malice to come to the forefront.

"Xingchen-ge doesn't eavesdrop. It's sickening how pure he thinks he is."

"Yet you're here, anyway, playing house."

"Wow, *someone* grew a spine." He was cruelly delighted.

*Wow, I have not missed him.* Qin Su mocked his diction. *By the way, he's not the only source of the resentful energy here, but there is a lot of it clinging to him.*

"Oh, oh! Let me guess. You found out you fucked your brother. Are you mad about the incest baby? You want *me* to take care of the great Lianfang-zun for you?" He laughed. Without the simpering quality he'd added for Xiao Xingchen's sake, goosebumps immediately covered her skin. "Too bad, I'm busy. Go away and go stab him in the back yourself."

That hadn't been the part she predicted having difficulty selling him on. "He had you beaten and left for dead. Don't you want revenge?"

"Sure." He shrugged. "I'll get around to it eventually, if no one else gets there first. Cheer up! You get first whack at him. I have some suggestions if you want them." He counted them off

on his five-fingered hand. “Castration, branding, carving up his skin, peeling off his nails while he screams for mercy. Choose your favorite murder fantasy and go wild!”

*Those are his murder fantasies? He is... not creative. Jin Guangyao already went through the branding and skin carving to become Wen Ruohan's direct servant. I've seen the scars.* Qin Su paused. *Please do not remind me why I've seen the scars.*

Jiang Yanli did not have to pretend to be disgusted; Xue Yang's presence alone achieved that effect. “What if I could offer you the spirit of the Yiling Patriarch? All access, in your head, for the time it takes to get revenge.”

There was a spark of interest in his eyes, quickly replaced by fury. “No one's been able to find the Yiling Patriarch's spirit. If you tease me too much, I might not let you go after all.”

Presumptuous to assume he could take her in a fight. His skill with a sword was undoubtedly greater, true, but she had A-Xian's talismans on her side. “Who said I needed to find it? His spirit will be sucked into you from wherever he is.”

She offered him a copy of the body-reshaping version of the Sacrifice Summon, with heavily edited captions in Wen Qing's handwriting. Most notably, describing an infusion of resentful energy, the desire for revenge, and the caster's blood as the catalyst for a non-controlling possession.

“Yaoyao did say the next thing to be transcribed would be a summoning of some sort. Is this it?” Eyes glittering, he leaned forward into her space, forcing her to lean back to avoid the stale candy scent of his breath. “How in the world did you get it? No one's more paranoid than Yaoyao.”

*Yaoyao.* Qin Su sniggered. *He must have hated that. I bet that's the real reason he threw Xue Yang out of Koi Tower.*

She shrugged. “I suppose he didn't think leaving it where his wife might come across it would be a risk. It hadn't been before.”

“Why are you offering me this? Why not summon the Yiling Patriarch yourself?” He squinted suspiciously, because it was so far out of the realm of his comprehension that someone might not want the so-called scourge of the cultivation world in their head. “Unless you're not sure it works, and think I'm expendable and gullible.”

“No, I know it works. I can't summon him myself because I've already used it.” She held out her arm, and pulled up her sleeve to show an old-looking cut, still raw at the edges. Jiang Yanli's was not from the ritual, of course. If it had been, Qin Su would be gone forever.

Wen Qing had guided her through the steps to keep a cut open, and she'd rubbed the herbal mixture over the cut every night since she'd left Koi Tower. It was the best approximation they could make, for the cuts that wouldn't heal until A-Xian got Xue Yang's revenge.

“Who's in your head, then?” He asked, intrigued.

“Jiang Yanli.”

“Who?”

She blinked. “The — the Yiling Patriarch’s shijie? Jin Ling’s mother.”

Somehow, it had never occurred to her that Xue Yang might not know who she was. She felt a moment of panic, wondering how she could prove it wasn’t simply a trick if they had to resort to Qin Su pretending to be her in a paperman.

He shrugged. “Ok, you’d probably have picked someone important if you were lying. But she really wants *me* to summon her brother? Seems unlikely.”

This was the trickiest bit — phrasing an argument in a way Xue Yang would both understand, and expect another person to understand. Wen Qing had coached her extensively on how to avoid setting Xue Yang off. Hopefully, this domestic fantasy of his had not changed his perceptions too much. “She’s as angry as I am. You’re good at murdering people; she wants to talk to her brother again. You get the Yiling Patriarch’s expertise in exchange for binding you to something you intend to do anyway.”

“Hm. I don’t like binding contracts.” Xue Yang said, even as his lips curved upwards with wicked intent. “But — Xingchen-ge!”

Xiao Xingchen emerged from the house, stopping in the doorway. “Yes?”

“I’m going on a trip!” Xue Yang exclaimed, the transformation back into his adoring persona even more disturbing now that she’d seen the real thing.

“Are you going home now? Are you certain it’s safe?”

He hummed off-key. “For a bit, at least. Maybe I’ll be back here, before you know it.”

“You will, of course, be welcome.” Xiao Xingchen said softly. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too, Xingchen-ge!” Xue Yang sounded almost genuine as he ran inside. There was a sound of things falling as he presumably packed his qiankun bags.

*Creepy. At least he won’t be missing anyone soon.*

“Are you already leaving tonight?”

Xue Yang’s focus was already elsewhere. “Oh, yeah, we have time to get down to town before nightfall.”

“You must be eager to see your sect siblings again. I understand.” Xiao Xingchen sounded sad, but he would be better off without him.

“Sure.” Xue Yang said noncommittally.

When Xue Yang was packed, Jiang Yanli walked out of the courtyard a few steps behind him. She didn't trust him at her back. "There's an empty warehouse a few streets over. I'll do it there."

"You're eager, for someone who doesn't like binding contracts."

"I've wanted to steal the Yiling Patriarch's secrets for years, of course I am. Besides, the strength of the resentful energy in Yi City should help with the array. I barely even had to build it up myself, it was already like this!"

"I... see." So if Qin Su was worried she was seeing something that wasn't really there, she could stop that now.

*I don't think Xue Yang's word proves that. But I was thinking that was what he did.*

"No second thoughts now!" Xue Yang turned to walk backwards, clasping his hands behind his back. "What's the soup for, by the way?"

"You'll be starving after. I was." She lied. "And this was Wei Wuxian's favorite dish."

Xue Yang's grin widened to unnatural proportions. "Oh? The Yiling Patriarch's favorite? I'm learning things already!"

Xue Yang drew the array with an intense focus Jiang Yanli hadn't thought him capable of only moments earlier. She watched from a safe distance near the wall.

"Hmm, I can add more than one target, right? So that'll be Su She. Those Jin guards who beat me. Fuck, I need to know their names, don't I?" He tapped a paintbrush, red with his own blood, against his chin. "Let's see, it was... Fan Caining, Jin Qian..."

He listed four more names as he inscribed them in the appropriate places around the array, all of whom were relatively strong cultivators, but outer disciples, or Jins too far removed from the main line to be named by the generational poem. All of them, according to Qin Su, sycophants. As happy to take unscrupulous orders as go night hunting.

Xue Yang looked up. "Do you think I should add Yao-zongzhu?"

She didn't think anyone would be particularly upset if he died, but that was already eight people who would have to die for A-Xian's new lease on life to become permanent. "Has he ever done anything to you?"

"Only tried to annoy me to death."

"I don't think the array would count that, no." Jiang Yanli knew no such thing. But A-Xian wouldn't be particularly happy about the guards as it as.

Xue Yang sighed wistfully. "You're probably right. I'll just have to get around to him at some point. And I can't add Xingchen-ge or Song Lan or the brat, because of the time limit. Only a

year? No, I want to draw that out.”

With one final symbol, the array was complete. Xue Yang hummed to himself as he carved the incisions into his arms. As he finished the last one, resentful energy was pulled towards him, now visible, from the surrounding air.

At first, he laughed.

Until the first black bubble formed on his hand, like the pustules on a rotting fierce corpse.

Xue Yang stared at it, in shock, and swore viscously as he shook it out. Black blood landed on the ground with a wet splat. That didn't stop more bubbles from forming, and proliferating. Even as he shook them off, the discarded bubbles began to inch back towards him.

Jiang Yanli was horrified, and a little fascinated, her eyes glued to the transformation.

Qin Su balled up in her mind just enough to block her vision.

Even as she watched Xue Yang die, and she became a murderer, Jiang Yanli did not regret her choice.

Xue Yang finally accepted what was happening as the bubbles reached his neck. “You lied, you bi—”

The bubbles covered his mouth, cutting off the insult. His eyes were left for last, betrayed, and conscious to the very end. The body dropped to the ground, a seething mass of twitching darkness, as the reshaping continued.

Eventually, it lay still, human in appearance once again. Unmoving.

Just as Jiang Yanli was beginning to wonder if that was it, a flash of light shot down into the body - A-Xian's body now, she could accept nothing else — and a cloud of resentful energy flew out from the array, making her flinch and cough.

When it cleared, Jiang Yanli rushed to the edge of the array, desperate to reach her brother. But she stopped, afraid to cross the barrier too soon.

A curtain of dark hair obscured his features, stealing away her chance to make sure that this body, at least, was his.

Qin Su sent soothing waves to her, but didn't say anything. She, too, was caught in breathless anticipation.

When he finally stirred, she gasped.

A-Xian looked up at her through bleary eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

So some of you guessed it :)

There will be multiple POVs from now on! Mostly JYL and WWX, but I have things planned for some other characters too.

Jin Huiqing's many cats are a tribute to a character in *Machineries of Empire* who names their cats after infamous assassins.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

Jiang Yanli uses the power of communication; Wei Wuxian flexes his inventing muscles

## Chapter Notes

I wanted to get a bit further with this chapter but WWX had a lot of feelings

**Content warnings:** WWX's residual suicidal thoughts, a little more body horror

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Awareness rushed in with a crack like lightning. With it came pain, but not as much as Wei Wuxian would have expected from exploding into a pulp of blood and guts.

The ground beneath him felt solid. Cool and rough like poorly sanded wood, nothing like the smooth, burning volcanic stone that should have bordered the river of lava, should he have been unlucky enough to neither fall in nor die on impact.

Wei Wuxian was still, it seemed, in possession of arms. Because those were what hurt — and only those. That, and a bit of a crick in his neck from lying face down on a hard surface, and a possible splinter in his cheek.

He inhaled the scent of dried blood with every breath, and still, only his forearms burned.

Dust from the floor made his nose itch.

Fuck. He was alive. And definitely not at the bottom of a cliff.

He could only conclude that he had been resurrected. A few feet away he would find the names of whoever someone had decided to give up their very soul to destroy.

What if he just... didn't? Wei Wuxian hadn't agreed to this. He hadn't wanted to be brought back. He'd only wanted the two people left in the world he cared about to live, without him around to get in the way.

He lay there longer than necessary, contemplating it. But in his heart, he always knew he would get up. Besides, he felt... not great, honestly. But more alive than he'd felt in a while. Like his soul had taken a nice sabbatical.



Like he'd come out of an extended, impossibly peaceful meditation. Similar to that used to cultivate to immortality, but for the dead. And landed in a body only slightly less full of resentful energy than the one he'd vacated.

Wei Wuxian pushed against the floor, raising his head. Someone gasped.

As he raised himself into a seating position, he swept the curtain of hair away from his eyes, and laid eyes on a stranger. A short young woman, draped in Jin gold and muted pink, both hands pressed over her mouth. A sword lay on the ground next to her, almost like she'd dropped it.

But cultivators never dropped their swords.

"A-Xian!" The woman breathed.

That couldn't be good. Only Shijie had ever called him that. Did the Yiling Patriarch still have obsessive followers even after he so publicly self-destructed? Or worse, had the Jin decided to use him for their own purposes.

Wei Wuxian had only just been resurrected, and he was already in trouble.

Unfortunately, wherever he'd been must have been peaceful, because Wei Wuxian was feeling a lot less self-destructive, compared to the last thing he remembered:

Lan Zhan, still trying to save him, though he was already dead long before destroying the Stygian Tiger Amulet sealed the deal. Jiang Cheng, finally done with him, but missing his swing, and nearly killing Lan Zhan as well. Wei Wuxian had been happy to fall.

Yet now he felt more alive than he had in years.

Which meant that whatever this was, he had to deal with it. Ugh. "Who are you?"

"Oh, right. You won't recognize me like this." She hurried to the wall behind her, and picked up a tureen. Wei Wuxian maneuvered himself into a sitting position as she did so, readying himself to run, once his legs felt strong enough.

And once he figured out who this woman and who the poor sap had killed himself for revenge expected the great and terrible Yiling Patriarch to kill.

She set it down on the edge of the array, and lifted the lid.

Only one thing in the world smelled like that. Just the smell was enough to bring tears to his eyes. His world shifted on its axis. "Shijie?"

She nodded, blinking rapidly.

He launched himself forward out of the array, and into her arms. "I'm sorry." He sobbed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Xianxian, no. I'm here." She said, but she was crying too.

They fell to the ground together, and, because neither Wei Wuxian nor Jiang Yanli had ever been ashamed of crying, stayed that way for a long time. He stroked her hair and clung like he was nine years old again, and she was the first person he could remember tucking him in at night. The one he ran to when he didn't understand why Madame Yu hated him so much. But now, she clung back just as fiercely.

He couldn't believe she was here. Who would ever have summoned sweet, caring Jiang Yanli to take revenge? Few people knew how strong she was in spirit. And the body she was wearing remained entirely unfamiliar. Smaller, but more solid in his arms than Shijie had ever been.

Eventually, she pulled away, just far enough to ladle out a bowl of soup and press it into his hands. She watched him like a hawk until he'd eaten half the bowl, though he was still more than a little choked up.

When she was satisfied he wasn't going to wither and starve to death in the next five minutes, she said, "There's something else you should know. Your Lan Wangji —"

"He's not mine." No matter how much he wished it. Wei Wuxian had only ever cast his shadow on Lan Zhan's light. He couldn't let himself do that to him again.

"You should let him decide that for himself, but that wasn't the point." Shijie rolled her eyes as she patted his hand. She even took away his bowl and set it on the ground, which went to show that this was serious. Shijie would never take away soup without good reason. "He saved your A-Yuan. Lan Yuan, courtesy Sizhui now. "

"Sizhui? Lan Zhan — me?" Lan Zhan couldn't really have named his A-Yuan *Sizhui*, could he? That was — *Wei Wuxian* had been the one yearning, longing for someone out of reach. After Wei Wuxian's first stint in the Burial Mounds, he never could have been worthy of Lan Zhan, of what they could have meant to each other. Lan Zhan, well meaning, had persisted in trying to help him. But he hadn't thought Lan Zhan would still — not after all he'd done.

"A-Xian." Shijie wiped her thumbs under his eyes, and he realized he'd begun crying again. "Those of us who know you for who you are, and not the masks you show the world, cannot help but love you."

Lan Zhan was — Lan Zhan —

Wei Wuxian could not drag him into this, whatever revenge he was expected take. But maybe, someday —

"Anything else I should know while I'm out of tears?" He asked, when his eyes were swollen and puffy and finally dry.

She told him about the Wen siblings, and he wasn't out of tears after all. At least Shijie had always been a sympathetic crier, so at least he wasn't alone in his weeping.

After their tears finally died away, and Shijie had plucked a pair of his drying talismans from her sleeve, she refilled his soup. Wei Wuxian really was out of tears this time, or he might

have started off again.

Only then did he remember to clarify what, exactly, was going on. Now that Shijie had told him all the important things. That he hadn't gotten everyone he ever loved killed or condemned to a life of misery, after all.

"How did you manage this?" He asked around a mouthful of heavenly pork. "Whose body is this, I mean? And yours?"

Wei Wuxian listened with increasing horror as Jiang Yanli told the story of waking up in the body of the new Madame Jin, all the way through to the array he'd woken up in. His curiosity was sparked by the implications of what Qin Su had done — closer to what he'd been trying to accomplish with the arrays than anything he'd been able to achieve.

And she'd done it entirely by accident, with consequences they had yet to fully understand. All of which seemed to rest on Qin Su's shoulders, with no signs that Shijie was anything but firmly anchored in her body. It bore further investigation anyways.

Though for the moment, another concern was more pressing.

"Xue Yang?" Shijie had gone near *Xue Yang* to bring him back? That twisted, murdering bastard without even a sense of scale to temper his depravity. And she'd done it for him. He wasn't worth the risk. He should have killed Xue Yang years ago, when he had the chance — There was a wrenching feeling in his gut as his fear and anger spiked, irrationally, over a matter already settled. "Oh, ow. What the fuck."

No, not his gut. His lower dantian. That sure was a tainted golden core, so it really must have been Xue Yang. The state of his golden core would certainly explain why Wei Wuxian felt so off.

Xue Yang's golden core, which was now his. A golden core, something he'd long believed lost to him forever, resting inside him, an unwilling gift from his enemy.

Wei Wuxian was simultaneously disgusted and euphoric.

He'd never had to deal with the risk of qi deviation before, because the resentful energy hadn't interacted nearly so badly with the sluggish flow in his meridians after its driving force was removed.

"What's wrong?" Jiang Yanli put one hand over his forehead, and held his wrist in the other. He felt her, prodding around for what was wrong with spiritual energy. Something she never could have managed before.

Only Wen Qing knew how to treat this, though.

"Well, when a cultivator with a golden core uses demonic cultivation, it taints it with resentful energy. A little is fine and gets burned off, but a lot like Xue Yang — I'm surprised at how well he was holding off from a qi deviation, honestly." "That's why when I —" He broke off in a laugh.

Shit.

It was too much to hope that Shijie hadn't caught his slip. "A-Xian. What happened to your golden core?"

"Um." He really should have said Wen Zhuliu, but he couldn't lie directly to Shijie. Not when she was staring at him, wide-eyed and concerned. Even if those eyes weren't the ones he knew.

Wei Wuxian dared anyone to resist that.

When his confession was complete, she said nothing. Only sniffled.

Finally, she hugged him tight again, and ladled out more soup, though Wei Wuxian had yet to finish the second bowl. He dug in, shoveling each bite in, but chewing slowly, savoring the flavor like he'd never known he should before.

Tainted or not, the golden core inside him was fully formed and strong. An impossibility and a blessing.

"Are you all finished with the emotional reunion?" Nie Huaisang of all people swanned through the door. "Great! Hi, Wei-xiong!"

Gaping, he looked from Nie Huaisang to Shijie.

Shijie's expression said *oh right*, him.

Ok, then. This was happening. "Hi, Nie-xiong. How have you been?"

Nie Huaisang plopped down in a heap across the soup tureen from him. "I've been better! Jin Guangyao killed my Dage, so we're getting revenge."

"Right, Shijie told me. Is he the only one I have to kill?"

Shijie shook her head, confirming his suspicions. "Him, another sect leader, and a few of Jin Guangyao's guards. I'll write the names down for you."

Wei Wuxian *really* wanted to be done killing people. He wanted to — well, he wanted an impossibility. Traveling with Lan Zhan and A-Yuan, visiting Shijie and Jiang Cheng often in Lotus Pier, helping Wen Ning grow new varieties of vegetables in his garden, and arguing cultivation theory with Wen Qing. Even if Lan Zhan still wanted him, if they saved both the Wens, Jiang Cheng would never want to see him.

Shijie turned to Nie Huaisang. "We need to get him in to see Wen Qing."

"Well, I can certainly provide a distraction, but he can't just walk into Koi Tower like that." Nie Huaisang hummed, tapping his closed fan against his lips. "You need a disguise."

"A mask?" That would be the easiest thing to get a hold of.

But Nie Huaisang was shaking his head. “No, no, that won’t work. That’s just suspicious. You need something no one will see through.”

“I’ll think about it.” He wasn’t entirely sure that a mask wasn’t the solution — just not the sort of mask anyone else had ever come up with.

“You do that. In the meantime,” Nie Huaisang clapped his hands together. “Questions.”

“How did you get Xue Yang to give up his body to me?” Shijie hadn’t mentioned the details, but Wei Wuxian assumed the trickery had been at Nie Huaisang’s hands.

But Nie Huaisang tsked and shook his head. “*I* didn’t do it. Your sister did.”

“Shijie?”

“I lied.” She said, a slight flush rising to her cheeks. By the time she finished explaining what she’d done, he was looking at her in an entirely new light. “I wanted you back. I could save you, so I did.”

“Shijie. I — but. Your husband.” Wei Wuxian had been so caught up in having her back, that he hadn’t even apologized yet. What kind of useless brother was he?

Nie Huaisang got to his feet and practically ran for the door at the first sign of emotion.

“It wasn’t on purpose.” Shijie tried to put her hand on his shoulder, but Wei Wuxian flinched away.

“How did you know?” After all the time he’d spent antagonizing Jin Zixuan, calling him the Peacock and even attacking him in public, no one should have been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Shijie did not deign to answer, simply looked at him as though the question was ridiculous. As though she still trusted him, after everything.

“Well, you’re right. I didn’t mean to, but it was my fault.” No matter how he thought of it, if it were not for Wei Wuxian — if he’d taken a less obvious route, if he’d taken Wen Qing with him instead or gone alone, if he’d imposed on Lan Zhan enough to ask for an escort, if he’d simply remembered how easily the power given by the Yin Iron could be stolen away — . “I stole Wen Ruohan’s control, and I forgot someone could do the same to me.”

“It is *not* your fault. You were ambushed, and scared, and trying to defend yourself.” Shijie hugged him, and again, he melted into her arms.

“It is, though. It is.” Wei Wuxian choked down a sob. He *really* couldn’t start that back up again. “I just wanted to meet your son.”

“You will.” She assured him, petting his hair soothingly, the way she had as long as he’d known her. Wei Wuxian couldn’t believe his luck.

When they emerged from the warehouse, Nie Huaisang was waiting.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Shijie asked Nie Huaisang.

“If it’s here, Xue Yang hid it well.” He sighed heavily, and didn’t even flourish his fan. So clearly whatever he’d been searching for was important.

Something in this little town full of coffins and burial goods, complete with paper mannequins peering out the windows. It was scarcely dusk, but the streets were already empty. He could feel — but not see, not like the mysterious resident of Shijie’s head — the mostly inert resentful energy everywhere. He could see what would have attracted Xue Yang to the town, but not why he wouldn’t have simply made it more of a living hell, and moved along.

The slippery little bastard had done nothing but complain of boredom on the way to what should have been his execution, after all. “What was he doing here anyway? It’s an eerie little town, but you said he’d been here a while?”

“Well, he was kicked out by Jin Guangyao, and it seems he set up a domestic little arrangement with Xiao Xingchen.” Nie Huaisang made an effort to sound flighty but his mind was clearly still elsewhere.

How the — no, actually, he didn’t want to know. Everything Wei Wuxian learned of the events following his death was stranger and more unsettling. “And my shishu won’t wonder what happened when he never comes back?”

Peering into the darkness of an alley, Nie Huaisang flapped a hand dismissively. “I’m having Song Lan tracked down. He’ll forget all about him soon enough.”

Good for his shishu. He deserved his second chance at love. Wei Wuxian hadn’t had time to be devastated over their separation, the failure of what he’d wanted his life to be because he’d been too busy throwing it away.

But maybe, just maybe. If he completed Xue Yang’s revenge and was here to stay, if Shijie and A-Ling and the Wen siblings were all safe and secure. Maybe he could earn a second chance with Lan Zhan someday.

It would take years to make up for his mistakes, Wei Wuxian imagined, a slow courting of hundreds of handmade gifts and tracking down the most challenging hauntings across the cultivation world. He’d remind Lan Zhan that he was good with children, and be there to help him raise A-Yuan the rest of the way. Show him he would never miss another moment.

There went his imagination, wanting things that were distant possibilities as best. Who was to say Lan Zhan hadn’t moved on? All Shijie had to go on was guesses, gossip, and a glimpse.

They passed a row of coffins, just waiting to be filled with some unlucky sap. Wei Wuxian drew up short. “Why do I sense some *really strong* resentful energy?”

“Xue Yang was turning people into puppets for fun.” Nie Huaisang said, causing both him and Shijie to glare at him. It seemed he’d failed to mention that to both of them.

Though, honestly, Wei Wuxian should have guessed. He pinpointed the coffin that felt like a mass grave, and whistled with no force behind it. Even so, a shifting spiderweb of resentful energy briefly became visible. *That* was a ward. One that would take him about an hour to unravel, using demonic cultivation.

Or, conveniently, application of Xue Yang's own spiritual energy.

"No, this is more static. Almost like —" He shoved hard at the lid of the coffin, and it slid forward a few inches, letting out a cloud of black smoke. "Shit, Xue Yang's piece of Yin Iron."

"Excellent! Exactly what I was looking for." Nie Huaisang perked up, his usual good humor restored. "Do you think you can —" Shijie, uncharacteristically, pinched his arm sharply. "Jiang-guniang, why? I was going to say destroy it."

"Sure," He said absently. "Same way I did the Tiger Seal."

"Can you destroy it without hurting yourself?" Shijie asked gently, reminding him exactly how *that* had gone.

"I can't, but didn't Lan Xichen manage it somehow?" He kept shoving at the lid, to no avail. Right, Xue Yang must have a sword somewhere. He reached into his sleeve and found a hilt, as well as a pair of qiankun bags.

"He said that, but Dage told me in confidence that the pair of them sealed them away again in secret. I don't know if Erge told him where. *I* certainly don't know." Nie Huaisang paused. "And yes, I do mean that."

The sword felt worse than the core, like it was used to Xue Yang's cultivation. Jiangzai, it was called. That felt suiting. But though it resisted him, when Wei Wuxian sent a bolt of energy through it, the lid went flying into a wall thirty feet away.

Oh, so it was either nothing or too much with Jiangzai. He saw how it was.

Wei Wuxian stared down at the contents nestled inside. The Yin Iron was there, shaped into what looked like another Tiger Seal, but less powerful by far. Stacked right on top of two items that were undoubtedly just soaking in that resentful energy. Fuck. "Um. Nie-xiong? I think Xue Yang has your brother's body. Also Baxia."

It was agreed that Nie Mingjue's body would have to be retrieved the next day, as Wei Wuxian had only just been resurrected and neither Nie Huaisang nor Shijie could fly. Shijie didn't say, but he assumed she either hadn't had time to learn, or temperamental swords were a side effect of resurrection.

In case it was the latter, he should probably bring that up at some point.

Shijie handed him some talisman paper, so he could construct a ward over the coffin, and they went down the foothills to an inn where Jin Ling was waiting.

His baby nephew had already been put to bed by the time they arrived. Which was all for the better because that meant Wei Wuxian actually got to see him.

Jin Ling was so big already, grown bigger than A-Yuan had been in what seemed to him the blink of an eye. Six years old, when he should have been all of a hundred days. Wei Wuxian reached out and hesitated, looking up at his shijie.

She nodded, watching them both with her heart in her eyes.

He hesitated several more times on the way to touching A-Ling's hair, afraid that touch would shatter the illusion. But A-Ling didn't disappear when Wei Wuxian touched him. A-Ling's skin had the downy texture of childhood and his hair was silky under his fingertips, a sign of how healthy and loved he was. Jiang Cheng had taken such good care of him, though that never should have been his job, if not for Wei Wuxian.

A-Ling stirred under his touch, and he snatched his hand back, but the boy only shifted onto his side, and stuck his thumb into his mouth.

Wei Wuxian loved him so much, just as he'd known he would.

Because Wei Wuxian couldn't bear to give up his scant moments with his darling nephew, he, Shijie, and Nie Huaisang sat on the floor to discuss how they would break Wei Wuxian into Koi Tower unnoticed.

Not something he ever expected to want. But he did want to see Wen Qing for himself — they needed to yell at each other for self-sacrifice, without her paralyzing him again. And Shijie would worry if she didn't know he was alright. So Wei Wuxian supposed he would let Wen Qing poke around in Xue Yang's core.

As Shijie and Nie Huaisang heatedly (for them) debated their methods, Wei Wuxian occupied himself by unpacking Xue Yang's bags item by item.

The current Nie First Disciple, a woman he'd fought alongside on occasion during the Sunshot Campaign, stood guard outside the door. Neither she, nor the younger disciples accompanying her, had seen remotely surprised to see him. So Wei Wuxian assumed resurrecting notorious traitors was just par for the course in things their sect leader did.

He reached in and grabbed something with an odd, elastic texture. Pulling it out, he flinched. And flung it on the floor.

It was a mask of someone's face. He'd seen them before, when a possessed woman in Yunmeng had started carving the faces off her neighbors and wearing them as masks. This, though, was melded together to form a face disturbingly similar to Song Lan's. And according to Nie Huaisang, Song Lan was still alive.

Had he written about that night hunt? Xue Yang could easily have modified the method. He would bet Jin Guangyao had focused on the profitable ideas among his inventions, and let Xue Yang make the most grotesque techniques of his demonic cultivation worse. The techniques that could do *good* had almost certainly been left to languish.



Even if Jin Guangyao wanted to leave reform as his legacy, he couldn't openly use techniques that showed demonic cultivation was not all sacrificing virgins and creating puppets from amalgamated rotting meat. Better for him that the Yiling Laozu remained a monster under the bed, even if it meant leaving people to starve, their fields and forests tainted with resentful energy.

Well, if Xue Yang could twist his techniques, Wei Wuxian could twist them back.

"You, Wei-xiong, look like you're having an idea." Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan. Wei Wuxian's eyes narrowed as he looked back and forth between it, and the creepy skin mask on the ground.

He thought back to the brightest period of his childhood, flashes of a masked figure twirling and kicking on a stage, flourishing a fan in sharp movements, creating an illusion of transformation. "Nie-xiong. You're a cultural connoisseur."

"I make an effort."

"That dance where the performer changes masks behind a fan — do you know how it works?" The dance, from Meishan, involved face changes, using greasepaint or changing the color of a beard. Or, more importantly, masks. Madame Yu had enjoyed it, often hiring troops from her natal sect's territory to perform for guests and during festivals. Wei Wuxian didn't know the trick to it, but Nie Huaisang might.

"The Bian Lian? That is a particular favorite of mine."

"No, really? I would never have guessed." He never would have expected Nie Huaisang of all people to enjoy a dance that involved fans! Or masks!

Nie Huaisang rapped him on the shin with his fan, and "Ow, fuck, is that thing made of steel?"

"I wouldn't know." Nie Huaisang said primly, which Wei Wuxian took as a yes.

"Huaisang." Shijie gave him a disappointed look.

It wasn't quite as stern as in her own face, Qin Su's heart shaped face rendering it somehow even more gently chiding, but it was just as effective. Nie Huaisang sighed. "Yes, I know how it works. Would you like me to sketch a diagram?"

"Please."

Wei Wuxian interpreted Nie Huaisang's caving to Shijie as his having been officially taken under her wing. He wondered if that meant they were brothers now.

It was a little-known secret that Wei Wuxian was not the only child raised by Jiang Fengmian to collect family wherever he went. He had, in fact, picked up that trait from his sister. Around the time she'd decided he was her didi, no matter that Wei Wuxian was never officially adopted into the clan.

“What are you thinking, A-Xian?” Shijie asked, while Nie Huaisang was busy being unnecessarily artistic with his diagram. Wei Wuxian would have so many extraneous swirls to work around.

“Well, I’m not wearing that thing. I’m pretty sure it is human skin, just not the person’s face it’s copying.” Wei Wuxian might control corpses on occasion, but he wasn’t wearing one on his face. That was just gross, in a uniquely Xue Yang fashion. Just remembering the moment he’d touched it made him want to spend the next week becoming a prune in an excessively soapy bath. “But I can’t just run around like this.”

Neither Wei Wuxian’s own face nor Xue Yang’s was exactly ideal. But Xue Yang had committed each and every crime he was accused of, with more undoubtedly yet to come. Wei Wuxian had only committed some of crimes he was given credit for. He was grateful Shijie had ensured he was given his own back.

Besides, Wei Wuxian was clearly better looking than Xue Yang, whether they were being judged on a scale of handsomeness or prettiness.

That didn’t stop either face from being a problem. “So I thought, why not make a mask where I can pretend to be Xue Yang? But where I can also quickly change to a harmless face, and avoid any future angry mobs.”

Wei Wuxian would strongly prefer not to be the target of future angry mobs. The once had been more than enough.

“Impersonate Xue Yang? But A-Xian —” Shijie frowned, an expression he never wanted to put on her face. “Don’t get more involved in this than you need to be for my sake. I brought you back for selfish reasons, and I can ensure those marks disappear and leave you free.”

Obviously, Wei Wuxian would never do that. “Shijie, you brought me back because you *care*. And I love you too, so don’t tell me not to help you.”

She reached out to pet his hair, and he leaned into it. “You’ve sacrificed enough.”

Shijie might think so, but he would never agree. Wei Wuxian would always want to help. Not because he owed her for what he’d done — which he did — but because he loved her. On top of that, she was trying to overthrow a child murderer, and improve the lives of ordinary people in an unprecedented way. Of course he would do anything he could to help.

And he didn’t want her to have to learn how to kill.

He pulled away, and grasped her too-slim shoulders instead to meet those bizarre, smaller eyes that still, somehow, felt like her. “It’s not about sacrifice. I can be a distraction for you. If Jin Guangyao’s as clever as you say — and I remember that was my impression of him — he won’t stay ignorant of what you’re doing forever.”

“A-Xian—”

Wei Wuxian cut off her protest. This was the best way for him to help. Any protest she had could only be an attempt to protect him. “But if Xue Yang’s a ghost he can’t catch? Maybe you can pull it off.”

## Chapter End Notes

I figured, hey if I’m giving WWX a more powerful core than MXY’s, it can’t come without disadvantages

WWX is too caught up in the euphoria of his shijie being alive to even think about the fact that she didn’t ask him if he wanted to be (but WWX doesn’t really have any ground to stand on when it comes to that anyway...)

Bian Lian is a dance from Sichuan Opera. [Here's an example](#). My actual inspiration was Gaksital (2012), which was my absolute favorite kdrama in high school, back when I was really into those (almost a decade ago....). So I looked at the face-changing mask trope XY uses, and what the dance was called and lo and behold it's Chinese! To respect the (leaked) trade secrets, WWX's device is a single mask that uses spiritual energy to change between pre-set faces

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Summary

Another reunion, this time with more needles.

## Chapter Notes

Content warnings: Needles? I don't think there's much in this chapter to warn for.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jiang Yanli was thrilled to have A-Xian back, and she absolutely hated his plan.

He'd had little difficulty creating the device that would cloak him in a face meant for meaningless cruelty. He had carved a simple wooden mask, and etched characters into it with unusual care. While Jiang Yanli was still getting A-Ling dressed the next morning, A-Xian sketched a young man sweeping leaves across the street, and she walked down to breakfast to find a stranger sitting comfortably among the Nie.

There was nothing in his features to give away that this was a mask, or a face that did not belong to him. But his smile was still his own.

Nie Huaisang had already managed to find clothes in Nie gray that fit A-Xian. Jiang Yanli had to wonder if he'd prepared them beforehand, somehow remembering A-Xian's measurements without even needing to ask her.

"Shiji— Ah, I mean, Jin-furen. Are you going to introduce your little monster to me?" A-Xian grinned brightly.

She'd thought he would only be able to glimpse his sleeping nephew. But with this disguise, A-Xian could meet him, and A-Ling would never be able to give him away with a child's innocence.

A-Ling hid behind her back, suddenly shy, though he had not been with the Nie disciples the day before.

She knelt to get on eye level with her son. "It's alright, A-Ling. He's a friend."

Setting his jaw, A-Ling looked stubbornly away.

“Hold on a second.” A-Xian sketched a talisman in the air, and it burst apart into a flock of glittering butterflies. He’d invented it for distraction, but it also doubled as a foolproof way of charming small children.

A-Ling gaped, his hand dropping from her sleeve, and ran forward to jump for the butterflies. As they disappeared under his grasping hands, he laughed in delight.

A-Xian laughed with him.

“Would you show me that one?” Nie Xiaodan asked. “It would be great for convincing our novices to get up and start their exercises. Some of them think that because their Sect Leader is a layabout that means they can be too.”

Nie Huaisang looked up from dipping his youtiao, soy milk dripping from the end of the fried bread. “Our finances are in better shape than they’ve ever been, and I let her manage night hunts as she wishes, and this is the thanks I get.”

“Except for the ghoulish infestations you have us move or neglect to keep the other sects and your own peasantry convinced you’re incompetent.” Nie Xiaodan patted her Sect Leader hard enough on the shoulder that he shifted forward in his seat. “So, yes, this is your thanks, A-Sang.”

“The disrespect, not even calling me Zongzhu!” Nie Huaisang complained, even as he preened.

A-Xian laughed as he moved a century egg from his own congee to A-Ling’s. “Sure, I can teach you the talisman. I bet I could modify it so the butterflies last longer, and change directions when someone comes near, so they have to keep chasing them. What do you think, A-Ling? Would that be fun!”

“Mnnmf,” A-Ling agreed, as a blob of his breakfast failed to make it into his mouth. A-Xian beat her to wiping his mouth off, and A-Ling didn’t even flinch, already comfortable with him. Shiny new playthings and a smiling face worked wonders with children, but she hoped A-Ling somehow recognized that he should be important to him.

Jiang Yanli smiled, and brushed a strand of hair back away from her son’s mouth.

After breakfast, Nie Xiaodan and the other disciples parted from them to retrieve Nie Mingjue’s body, and transport him back to Qinghe for burial.

A-Ling had started out the ride babbling excitedly over a series of talismans A-Xian showed him, but eventually, he tired out and dozed off in Jiang Yanli’s arms, trusting her implicitly to keep him upright on the horse.

“It works like this, see?” A-Xian explained while they were on the road, still wearing that stranger’s face so A-Ling couldn’t describe his real one by mistake, only some friendly Nie

disciple. He rode hands free, pressing the mask over a drawing of Xue Yang's face as he etched new shapes into a second mask.

With his poor memory for faces, A-Xian hadn't remembered the details of Xue Yang's features. But Jiang Yanli's glaring had not been enough to stop Nie Huaisang from describing him.

Qin Su was a voice of reason where she didn't want one. *You do have to admit it is a good plan. Jin Guangyao's very observant — your brother's plan could make a huge difference in how successful we are in undermining him.*

Jiang Yanli had to admit no such thing. *I thought you were afraid of him.*

*I stopped the moment he brought out the butterflies. It's incredible to me now that anyone who met him could be frightened of him.*

*He can be intimidating when he wants to, make it seem like he doesn't care about anything.* For her, it was only terrifying to watch her brother do that to himself. *His act fooled almost everyone, even A-Cheng.*

*But not you.*

No, A-Xian had never fooled her.

Jiang Yanli would feel much better if there were someone out there, watching his back. If A-Xian would let himself be convinced to go see his zhiji before he committed to any reckless plans. But he had so far ignored her hinting.

Pressing it over the first mask, his features changed in the space of a blink, and Xue Yang stared back at her.

Only the malice was missing.

He went on speaking, and that was even stranger. "I'll add on a few more faces, I think, so I can look like a respectable grandfather, or a random street kid at the drop of a hat. It doesn't really let me change my body's shape, so I won't be able to shrink into a stooped little granny, unfortunately — that would be even less suspicious. Faces should be enough though, I think."

"Very impressive, A-Xian. Switch it back, please?" It was, in fact, a monumental achievement, and one he'd achieved in only a single night. But there was only so long Jiang Yanli could stand to look at *that* face.

He sketched a talisman over the mask without looking, and with a shimmer of golden light, the first face returned. She would have preferred his own, but this was far preferable to the alternative.

The mask did solve the problem of how to smuggle A-Xian into Koi Tower unseen.

Nie Huaisang was all too happy to handle it.

Jiang Yanli entered Koi Tower first, the disciples she'd dismissed at Fengyang appearing at the city entrance as she'd predicted. The others waited outside the city until evening. She brought A-Ling to greet his uncle, as that was expected.

"I trust you had a productive trip?" Jin Guangyao reached out for A-Ling, and plopped him down on his lap. A-Ling giggled, and began to fiddle with a brush with a wet tip, promptly staining his fingers and flicking ink splotches onto his robes.

"I did." She clasped her hands behind her back to conceal the way her hands clenched into fists at the sight of Jin Guangyao touching her son. Every time it happened, Jiang Yanli had to fight the urge to grab him away and run as far from Koi Tower as she could get. Though Jin Guangyao spoiled A-Ling, she and Qin Su both knew sharing blood would not be enough to protect him, if Jin Guangyao decided he wanted him gone. "I believe Zhai-zongzhu's planned watchtower locations will be well situated to respond to their most difficult to reach locations. I also provided a few suggestions to Qi-zongzhu. Many of his choices were too close to a temple sect and one was on land that floods regularly."

"Good, good. Would you mind summarizing those suggestions for me? Qi-zongzhu can be so absentminded, we may need to remind him." He steepled his fingers, the effect ruined as A-Ling spread ink across the curve of his cheek. Jin Guangyao's smile twitched. "Excellent, thank you. You also stopped in to see our dear cousin, I believe?"

*Our cousin*, Qin Su repeated bitterly.

Her breath caught. "I did, yes. I know they had a falling out with my sister, but we're still quite fond of each other."

"I feel the same way about Huaisang, though he does test my patience sometimes." Jin Guangyao did not bring up any of her subsequent extracurriculars. Instead, he plucked the brush from A-Ling's fist as he came dangerously close to spreading ink on his uncle's robes. He very seriously asked A-Ling his opinion on tablecloths for an upcoming event.

With that, Jiang Yanli understood the conversation was over. She turned to leave.

Nie Huaisang had a sense for timing, and chose that moment to test Jin Guangyao's patience. He burst in, wailing, with a rumpled, mud-stained, an out of breath steward on his heels.

Simply a disciple left in his supposed Sect Leader's dust, A-Xian was able to slip in unnoticed.

Jiang Yanli met him near the kitchens, and after making certain the coast was clear, led him to Wen Qing's prison using the same techniques as the first time. Thankfully, this time it wasn't raining.

She knocked sharply on the closed window.

It was flung open with a bang only moments later, revealing Wen Qing, flushed with anger and her hair out of place from running her hands through it.

Jiang Yanli was struck with an odd, simultaneous desire to fix it and make it worse.

“Didn’t I tell you not to come here in person?” Wen Qing snapped.

They’d had no time to warn her, as the papermen had a limited range. “Jin Guangyao will be occupied for hours, and this is important.”

“I thought you were supposed to be...” Wen Qing trailed off, her eyes widening. “Did it work? Did he fall for it?”

A-Xian stepped out of the shadows, removing his mask. “Hi, Qing-jie.”

Wen Qing gasped, and grabbed for his sleeve. “Oh, my — Gods, get in here so I can smack you. How dare you die after we gave ourselves up for you?”

A-Xian let himself be tugged over the windowsill.

He freed his arm from Wen Qing long enough to bow. “This one apologizes for his grave blunder.”

Wen Qing sniffed, and gave him a quick hug. He beamed, even as tears gathered in his eyes, and squeezed back.

Jiang Yanli climbed inside while they were busy with their reunion and stayed by the window to watch for anyone approaching. From a distance, it would be difficult to tell her and Wen Qing apart, so they’d have enough time to hide under the bed if someone did arrive at an unscheduled time.

“You look awful,” A-Xian told Wen Qing, once they were seated at her desk. The stack of A-Xian’s journals was still there, but the rest of the table was now covered with illustrations of meridians covered in notes in Wen Qing’s writing. Most were scratched out.

Likely something to do with strengthening Jin Guangyao’s core then.

Rather than take offense, Wen Qing rolled her eyes. “Six years of confinement will do that to a person. You look like death warmed over.”

A-Xian laughed in delight. “That’s because I *am* death warmed over. I came back to life two days ago.”

“Your sister doesn’t look like that.” Wen Qing said, with a glance at Jiang Yanli that felt like a compliment.

Qin Su, for some reason, giggled.

“Obviously Shijie is better than me.” A-Xian turned to beam proudly at her. He was wrong, of course, in his belief that she was the best and kindest person in the world. He didn’t know



how the plans she'd set in motion would inevitably hurt the brother of the man he loved and treated the sovereignty of minor sects like weiqi stones, or how she'd threatened Nie Huaisang. But she smiled back anyways.

*I don't think he'll judge, when he finds out.* Qin Su said.

For the most part, no, he wouldn't. But knowing would forever change his perception of his beloved Shijie, leaving the reality of Jiang Yanli in her place. And she couldn't assume he would be so sanguine over Lan Xichen. A-Xian had always respected him, and hurting Zewu-jun would hurt Lan Wangji.

Qin Su gave the impression of a shrug. *Maybe seeing you more clearly will be a good thing.*

A-Xian and Wen Qing fell into an easy rhythm. Watching them, Jiang Yanli felt warm to her center.

"As happy as I am to see you, that's not enough reason for a visit." Wen Qing said, after a few more rounds of banter in which they pretended not to have missed each other. "What went wrong?"

"He's having problems with Xue Yang's core." Jiang Yanli explained, before A-Xian could reflexively deflect from the reason they were here.

Wen Qing whipped her head towards A-Xian so fast her neck cracked. "You have Xue Yang's core?"

He nodded, rubbing a hand gingerly over its place of residence. "I wasn't entirely sure a core would stick around, when I designed that array, but it seems like the array reshaped everything around it."

Groaning, Wen Qing took a moment to bury her head in her hands. "You never bring me normal problems. Next time, bring me a nice pulled muscle."

"I would also like a pulled muscle to be the extent of my problems." A-Xian sighed wistfully.

"We can dream." Wen Qing said, her tone flat and disbelieving. "What are the symptoms?"

"When I'm agitated — angry or frustrated, but not sad — his core feels like it's trying to tear itself apart. Like how the beginning stage of a qi deviation is described. On top of that, resentful energy is *in* his core, like he invited it there. It feels horrible." A-Xian leaned forward on his knees and gestured as he spoke.

Wen Qing nodded, and turned to her. "Have you had any with Qin Su's?"

She hadn't experienced anything along the lines of what A-Xian was describing. Qin Su's core felt almost like her own at this point. There was only the way her sword resisted her, draining her when she tried to use it as a spiritual tool, rather than merely a weapon. "Only when I try to control her sword. Chunsheng doesn't like me."

Qin Su slipped into a paperman and climbed up to her shoulder to elaborate. *<It saps her energy, so she can barely move, much less cultivate. We've kept trying, but there's no improvement.>*

“Oh, it's not just Jiangzai then? I bet they can sense we're not really their cultivators, despite the cores.” A-Xian perked up with excitement at the implications, before he visibly remembered that this affected him. “But, no. Qing-jie, the real problem is that Xue Yang thought mixing resentful energy in with his spiritual energy was a grand old time.”

“Let me take a look.” Wen Qing took his pulse first, then sent a thread of her own spiritual energy into him. “This *is* a mess. All that resentment is trapped in your core, and it's not purifying on its own. I'd bet Xue Yang had resentful energy flowing through his meridians, which would reduce how much gathered in his core and hold off qi deviation.”

She went silent, concentrating, as she continued her examination.

“Absolutely no demonic cultivation,” was Wen Qing's verdict. “The array seems to have cleared out your meridians, but this core is — well, it's a mess worse than even you've managed to get into on your own. We need to clean it out completely before I can start to help you manage the *occasional* use of a little resentful energy. That will take a while. Lie on your back, first.”

A-Xian obeyed, but not without complaint. “But how am I supposed to imitate Xue Yang if I can't use demonic cultivation?”

Carefully inserting the needles in several points along his torso, Wen Qing closed her eyes and began working with her spiritual energy through them. “You're supposed to be a genius inventor, aren't you? Invent something.”

A-Xian smushed his features together in childish irritation. “You're irritated. What did I do this time? I just got here!”

Smoke-like wisps of resentful energy rose from the ends of the needles, and to Jiang Yanli's eyes, vanished as it drifted away.

Qin Su's paperman craned its neck towards the ceiling. Its features were, of course, blank, but her voice gave away her interest. *<Its coiling into ropes up there.>*

“Wen Qing has been transcribing your work for Jin Guangyao.” Jiang Yanli told him when it became clear Wen Qing would keep him in the dark. “Your handwriting is...”

“Atrocious. But that's not the real issue here.” Wen Qing grabbed a notebook from the desk, and dropped it, open, over A-Xian's face. “I had to explain to my family's murderer that your notes sometimes cut off in descriptions of Lan Wangji's eyes. Or lips. Or *other body parts!*”

“In my defense, I never meant for anyone to see this.” He reached up to pluck the book from his face, and flipped through it, eyes going distant as he stared at one of his sketches.

“Well, I did.” Wen Qing plucked the needles from his meridians. “I need to work on your back now, flip over.”

Retrieving a new set of needles, she repeated her work on his lower back.

“Peace offering?” A-Xian attempted to turn his neck halfway around without disturbing the needles. “You’ve been talking to each other with papermen, right? What if I could offer a simpler alternative? To talk more easily at a distance. I had this idea shortly before Qiongqi... I was hoping to... I never wrote it down, but I remember how it would have worked.”

“You wanted to be able to talk to Lan Wangji, didn’t you?” Jiang Yanli asked softly.

“And you, Shijie!” He slumped, pouting. As though to express his disappointment that she would consider herself less important to him. Which she hadn’t, but A-Xian had never had a very secure estimation of his own importance, so he didn’t expect others to either. “But yes. It’s pretty simple, actually. Just hand me that paperweight? And a few more stones?”

“Stay still until I’ve removed the needles, you idiot!” Wen Qing pushed him back down by the shoulders.

A-Xian grumbled out his impatience, but to Jiang Yanli’s eyes he seemed more genuinely energetic than he’d been since before the attack on Lotus Pier stole everything from them. She doubted it could last, if he went forward with this mad plan of his, but she was pleased to see it.

When Wen Qing finally removed the last needle, A-Xian immediately hopped up onto his knees and grabbed for the paperweight. He hunted around for something else that would suit, and came up with an empty crystalline box free of decorative carvings. Retrieving the same steel chisel he’d been using to carve the masks, and applied it to stone.

“So the distance should be ... and the sound. No, wait, wrong radical.” A-Xian muttered to himself as he worked.

*<Forget the demonic cultivation, if Wei Wuxian can just invent things like this on the spot, that’s what the cultivation clans should fear him for.>* Qin Su slid down Jiang Yanli’s sleeve to the floor, and took a leap in A-Xian’s direction, slowed by the pressure of the air.

“Yes, all the explosions should be a warning to stay far, far away.” Wen Qing said dryly.

Qin Su paused with one paper leg in the air as she readied to take the next leap. *<Is this going to explode on us?>*

“I mostly explode things when figuring out to work metal, or with fire.” A-Xian looked up to grin mischievously at Wen Qing. “Qing-jie invents surgical techniques. That’s far more scary.”

Shrugging her little paper arms, Qin Su continued towards A-Xian to watch him work.

Wen Qing grimaced, hiding her amusement.

Jiang Yanli wanted to see her laugh.

“You know,” she said, “A-Xian may be right. A cultivator once told me the medical tent was more terrifying than any battlefield he’d ever been on. Right before I had to help a healer amputate his leg.”

Wen Qing let out a surprised peal of laughter, and caught herself, but her eyes sparkled as she looked at Jiang Yanli. She found herself without any desire to look away.

A-Xian whooped in success, and she saw that the stones in his hands had begun to glow. He jumped to his feet, with Qin Su holding onto his leg to avoid being knocked away into a wall.

“Okay, so! Hold this.” He placed an inscribed paperweight or box in Jiang Yanli and Wen Qing’s hands. “Think about each other, and put in just enough spiritual energy to activate a talisman. No more than someone without a Golden Core could manage, or you’ll overload it.”

Jiang Yanli met Wen Qing’s eyes as she thought about Wen Qing’s voice lulling her to sleep, the way she’d protested their presence but seemed secretly pleased, the way she always seemed so surprised to find herself smiling. The paperweight began to glow in her hands.

When Wen Qing’s did as well, she suddenly looked away.

A-Xian cleared his throat, prompting them, “Ok, now say something. Recite a recipe or something.”

Jiang Yanli started to list off the ingredients for doupi, one of the few recipes A-Xian had the patience for, but cut off when she heard her voice coming from the stone in Wen Qing’s hand.

“This is—” Wen Qing’s voice echoed from Jiang Yanli’s stone.

It worked. “What a fantastically useful invention.” She said, and again her own voice was repeated back. A-Xian beamed.

It would be... nice, to be able to talk to Wen Qing, and know she wasn’t projecting her consciousness across Koi Tower, leaving her body unaware and undefended. Without the small, but constant risk of Jin Guangyao walking in and finding her in that unmistakable, compromised condition.

“We’ll need to run some tests to see if maybe I can talk to you from a distance as well, but this should at least prevent you from needing to replace papermen regularly.” A-Xian said, as though he hadn’t just made the greatest breakthrough in cultivation since sword flight.

And done it casually. And not for the first time.

Even more importantly, it was accessible. Anyone could use it.

If they’d had these, after A-Xian defected, when he first had the idea... They had both made mistakes in attempting to save people, in their former lives. The Dafan Wen in his case; A-Xian himself, in hers. But their chief handicap had been the impossibility of regular

correspondence without giving the appearance of alliance and putting the fragile, still rebuilding Jiang Sect at risk. Without support from any save her husband and Lan Wangji, neither of whom had anything in the way of political influence, she would have been risking A-Cheng for A-Xian — an impossible choice.

This new invention could have made the difference.

Perhaps now, it *could* make the difference.

“If it doesn’t, I’m certain you’ll figure it out.” She told him.

“I had better hear from you constantly,” Wen Qing said, in a threatening tone that did nothing to disguise how much she cared.

A-Xian seemed to believe her, more than he ever had when A-Cheng expressed similar sentiments. Perhaps it was the time they’d spent merely surviving together, perhaps the secret they’d shared for so long. Perhaps it was that Wen Qing wasn’t all that much like A-Cheng, really, beyond the surface-level gruffness. There was less difference in their positions, and they shared a common curiosity.

“I want to hear from you every day. I — we — want to know you’re safe.” She needed to know. And with this, the ability to check in at anytime and make sure he was still there, Jiang Yanli might be more capable of watching him leave.

She still hated his plan, though.

“I’ll chatter at you until you’re sick of me.” A-Xian promised with a three-fingered salute and a blinding grin.

Jiang Yanli was going to worry over him incessantly, but she wouldn’t have it any other way.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was combined with the last one in my outline but I split it because three bullet points I thought would be 5k turned out to be almost 10. But the next scene needs to be at the beginning of a chapter, so it worked out!

I do really want to get to LWJ's part of the story though, I swear he's a major character!

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

Wei Wuxian begins Xue Yang's revenge. Jiang Yanli takes an afternoon with her son.

## Chapter Notes

And the plot is finally moving!

OCs in the first part of the chapter are one offs!

Tangjie = older female cousin on the father's side

**Content warnings:** some light horror with jump scares (? is it still a jump scare in text?), spiders, minor character death, mild gore, I'm gonna say upfront that wwx isn't actually using corpse powder on a bunch of innocent teenagers but it looks like it for a minute, hints of someone still having self-sacrificial tendencies (not wwx for once)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The trees shivered under an unnatural fog. Yet the sky above was clear, save for the eerie crimson light of the stars. Every gust of wind against the leaves was a howling moan, every rustle of the undergrowth a giant spider yao gathering itself to lunge. Jin Tianyu wanted to go *home*. He was going to be an accountant under the Chief Cultivator and help him change the world. *Important* things. Not like stupid night hunting.

He didn't need night hunting experience to do math.

But his instructors disagreed. Even Madam Jin had shaken her head when he asked for an exemption, and explained that he needed to be able to defend himself. He'd already delayed too much by avoiding night hunting until he was eighteen, two years away from his coming of age. But what could he ever need to defend himself from in Koi Tower, save the cheek-pinching fingers of elderly relatives?

And if he had to go night hunting, why did it have to be with *Fan Caining*? If only their regular blademaker or even Madam Jin herself ran these things. *Then* he would feel safe and protected, and not like his class' ostensible teacher, appointed to ensure the group made it back in one piece, would turn tail and flee should they run into anything more dangerous than a single ghost.

Which they would. Besides their target, a guai formed from a carpenter's worktable that had become animated, killed its owner, and run off into the woods, there had been reports of multiple yao formed from clouded leopards in these woods.

Not to mention the giant spiders. Jin Tianyu had had one on the ceiling of his room last night, and his roommate had refused to take care of it for him, right before rolling over and going right to sleep! He'd been forced to suffer through chasing it away with a broom by himself, whimpering all the while. And that was *without* the massive growth spurt resentful energy gave them.

Fan Caining suddenly swept his sword through the undergrowth, clearing out an ordinary pack of rodents. As he did so, something growled in the woods up ahead.

"That should draw something out." He informed the group, though they'd been taught in class that the best way to draw out a dangerous guai or yao was to choose a battleground by scouting during the day, and using a lure flag with a limited distance to reduce the risk of *attracting anything else*.

How a bunch of rodents would draw out a murderous worktable, Jin Tianyu did not know. But it might bring out those leopards!

The senior disciple had a build that seemed to be made of squares, which also described his personality. Flat and boring, with a few pointy spots that made him dangerous to cross. Jin Tianyu had learned that the hard way when he suggested they might, possibly want to scout beforehand, and Fan Caining hit him hard across the back with the flat of his sword. The bruise had yet to fade.

Sure enough, a leopard yao with glowing red eyes pounced on his slightly older cousin as they entered the next clearing. She shrieked and whacked at it with her sheathed sword while Jin Tianyu and everyone else gaped. Even Fan Caining.

As his tangjie managed to get her sword between herself and the leopard, Jin Tianyu shook off his shock and drew his sword. He held it in front of himself like a spear and charged, yelling. Sword pierced flesh with sickening squelch.

He'd screwed his eyes shut to avoid looking, he realized, and opened them. The leopard was dead alright, and his tangjie alive if covered in the leopard's blood. But it seemed Fan Caining had recovered at the same time he did. Either Jin Tianyu stabbing its gut or its beheading could have done it in.

"Thanks." Tangjie said, as she used his limp arm to pull herself up. "I was starting to think no one would step in."

The dozen other junior disciples looked sheepish.

"Of course," Fan Caining drew himself up prouder than any peacock in the Koi Tower gardens, though she hadn't addressed him.

The groaning noise sounded again, this time cut off with a wail.

Fan Caining waved him and the other junior disciples ahead as though nothing was wrong. Jin Tianyu cursed his luck for the thousandth time.

It was one of the outer disciples who first stepped in a trap. They tried to take another step, and found themselves immobilized at the edge of the clearing. Tangjie took a step forward and found herself shot up into the branches of the tree above. “I can’t — my hands are stuck to the branch!” She called down, in a panic.

Several other disciples moved to help, but found themselves in the same situation. Jin Tianyu’s limbs felt heavy, and he stood there dumb and immobile.

The groaning noise came again, but cut off in a laugh that could only come from a person.

Lilting laughter that sounded like his worst nightmare echoed through the clearing. Looking around, Jin Tianyu spotted a man dressed in black and silver reclining casually on a tree branch. Beautiful, in the way of jagged glass, only sharper. Like he would not only cut anything that got too close, but shred it into thin, unidentifiable slivers.

*If I was better at verse, I could be a poet, and leave cultivation behind forever.* Jin Tianyu thought absently.

The man looked familiar somehow, like he might have crossed paths with Jin Tianyu in passing. Except that Jin Tianyu had never left Lanling City before.

Fog rolled into the clearing, but only below the tree line, leaving the man clear and untouched above.

Jin Tianyu coughed. No, not fog. Powder.

Fan Caining stood in the center of the clearing, his sword shaking as he pointed it up towards the man. “Xue Yang? But you’re supposed to be —”

“Dead?” Xue Yang’s teeth shone white, bared in a threat, not a smile. “Yes, you did try very hard to make that happen. Too bad for you, I’m too crazy to die. Lucky for me, none of your friends are here this time to save you. Only a few tasty little children.”

To his surprise, Fan Caining did not try to run. Instead, he jumped up into the trees. “I can take you on my own, you weak little maniac.”

Xue Yang only laughed as he attacked.

Xue Yang. Jin Tianyu knew why he recognized him now. That was the former disciple brought in by the former sect leader, cast out by the current Chief Cultivator. The murderer of the Chang Clan.

He’d called them tasty.

Screw Fan Caining. They needed to get out of there.



Jin Tianyu tried to give himself leverage to get to his cousin by pushing against a tree, and found himself entirely turned around, no longer in the clearing.

He turned, and the trees seemed to spin around him. They continued to spin no matter how long he tried to stand still, stumbling, until finally he hit something solid and rough. A tree. He slid down it. Seated, his vision felt a little clearer.

He soon wished it wasn't.

Something dropped from the tree to dangle in above Jin Tianyu. He dared to peak, and immediately regretted it.

The slack, inverted features of Fan Caining stared back, his eyes bulging from his head, tongue swollen and hanging from blue-tinged lips.

Jin Tianyu screamed.

He woke to Tangjie slapping his cheeks. "Tianyu! Tianyu, wake up!"

"What... what happened?" Jin Tianyu said groggily, as his memory began to return. He sat up straight. "Xue Yang!"

"He left, but I think there was something in that fog. You inhale the most of it, but all of us breathed in a little." She explained. "We need to hurry back to the inn. The rest of the group has Cai-qianbei's body. Come on, we need to go."

She slung his arm around her neck, but as he stood, the vertigo returned in full force.

Somehow, they made it back to the inn, but he didn't remember it.

A young man rose from a table, then he was doubled and tripled and on again. He wore gray, with a boar on his shoulder. That meant Nie. Jin Tianyu remembered that.

"Did the lot of you run all the way back here like that?"

"What?" Jin Tianyu asked, and the next thing he knew, the Nie disciple was keeping him upright by the elbow, taking his weight from Tangjie so she could collapse in a chair.

Jin Tianyu stared up into the Nie disciple's face, at the angles of his defined cheekbones and jaw, with just the right amount of softness. Very symmetrical. He could do math with that face.

*Pretty.* He thought.

"Thank you." The Nie disciple flashed him a smile that made him want to faint all over again. "You've got corpse poisoning. Let's get some congee in you, now."

He was seated and a bowl of congee appeared in front of him out of nowhere, as though it had already been prepared. Even though it was evening, and he didn't think enough time had passed to make it.

Jin Tianyu couldn't be sure, though. He was too busy floating, the only thing anchoring him to his body the burning pain on his tongue.

That faded as he forced down more of the bowl, and he realized it was chili. He could see the flakes reddening his bowl. Tangjie, who loved chili, had scarfed it down with no problem. Jin Tianyu tried to put down the bowl.

"No, no, you have to eat the whole thing for it to work." The Nie disciple—who was even prettier now that his head was clearer—shoved the bowl back into his hands. "That was corpse powder you were poisoned with. You'll die."

Jin Tianyu shoveled the rest into his mouth.

The Nie disciple was tall. Very tall, as was the case for every Nie he'd seen with the sole exception of their current sect leader, but surprisingly thin, like he *didn't* spend all his spare time building up the muscles the Nie were well known for. The hair braided up into his guan was lopsided, like he'd done it up without looking in a mirror. But even under the influence of the corpse powder, Jin Tianyu had been correct. His face was *perfectly* symmetrical, without a single blemish or pore to be found. It would have looked unnatural, were his perfect face not so expressive. His brows arched and lips pursed sternly, but giving the impression that he was laughing.

"Now, would you mind telling me what happened?" His beautiful savior asked.

Speaking over each other, Jin Tianyu and the other disciples hurried to do so. But by the next morning, when they gathered to leave for Koi Tower, their savior was gone.

In Nie robes and a face that did not belong to him, Wei Wuxian did not receive a second glance until he first set foot in the Unclean realm. Once there, he constantly felt eyes boring into his back, but when he glanced over, he'd find disciples hard at work on their forms or their noses buried deep in texts. Which only went to prove their curiosity.

Even with Nie Huaisang for a sect leader, it wasn't every day that a stranger was brought into the sect and handed a high-ranking position. But the Nie Sect had few elders, and those they had were aged and gray because with saber cultivation, it was the weak who survived the longest. It seemed the Nie elders were retired in truth, pursuing hobbies like needlework and whittling and nagging their grandchildren to eat more.

By the time Wei Wuxian arrived in the Unclean Realm, Nie Mingjue's body had been hidden away, though not yet buried, for reasons known only to Nie Huaisang. No one said anything about that, either.

"And since I'm the weakest of the lot, I'll live to be a hundred," Nie Huaisang completed explaining his free reign to lead his sect however he chose, unparalleled by any other sect even a single generation past its founding as they approached the gates to the Unclean Realm.

Right before dropping a bomb on his head in the form of unwarranted and unwanted respectability. “My closest sect siblings know my motives if not my plans, so no one will oppose appointing you to the vacant position of fourth disciple.”

“What?” Wei Wuxian sputtered, tempted to check if Nie Huaisang was running a fever. “What happened to the last fourth disciple?”

Nie Huaisang snapped his fan closed, and opened it again, staring off into the distance.

Touchy subject. Understood. “Forget I asked.”

“Let’s just say Jin Guangyao owes the Nie Clan more than one life.” Nie Huaisang said, before dragging him through the gates and launching into a series of dramatic introductions that left his head spinning.

Apparently he was going by Nie Wang, courtesy Xiaomeng now.

Wei Wuxian had not been consulted on this. Walking around with everyone thinking his name was *hope* felt precisely in line with Nie Huaisang’s sense of humor.

True to form, Nie Huaisang did not deign to explain until he wanted something. Despite copious amounts of pleading, Wei Wuxian was forced to wait through a restless night of nightmares and a morning while his apparent new sect leader caught up on work to get his answers.

Finally, Nie Huaisang summoned him around lunch time. He was set up in a pavilion in the garden, with a mountain of paperwork. The garden had been designed by someone with an eye for showcasing Qinghe’s foliage. A lotus pond surrounded the pavilion, and though its cultivated beauty was no match for the wildness of Yunmeng’s lakes, the carefully selected flowers staggered through the surrounding paths were like hidden gems, each intended to stand on its own.

There were birds as well, goldfinches and many others kept there not by cages, but by the feeders full of seeds spread throughout.

“So,” Wei Wuxian said as he sprawled on a bench across the table from Nie Huaisang, who did not look up from his work to greet him. “I thought I was going to be a rogue cultivator. But apparently you had other ideas.”

“If you’re going to pull this off, the easiest way to wander around without notice is as one of my disciples. As a rogue cultivator, you might gather some recognition, get invited along to visit sects and so on. As one of mine, well, there are Nie disciples everywhere.” It was deeply disconcerting to watch Nie Huaisang take something seriously. And he was serious about that paperwork, not even looking up to speak. “They get bored of me, and travel.”

“They’re spies, aren’t they?”

He lifted his brush from a page with a flourish, and pinned it off to the side under a weight to dry, immediately moving onto the next one. “Are you saying I’m not irritating enough to

make people need a break? I *must* have an ulterior motive? I'll have to try harder."

"Oh, you're very irritating. They're just extremely loyal."

"After the Sunshot campaign and the losses we had during Dage's decline, both to desertion and other causes. And then the prospect of *me*. Well, anyone who's left is basically family."

He gestured at Nie Xiaodan, at that moment crossing the bridge towards the pavilion.

Nie Xiaodan patted him on the head as she passed by. "Don't forget to order lunch, Zongzhu." She said, and returned to discussing a night hunt with her companion. It seemed she had come for that reminder only.

Nie Huaisang beamed.

"Fine, I'll pretend to be your disciple." Wei Wuxian wanted to pretend he'd been given a choice.

"Excellent! We can get you a saber easily enough."

Uh. He had told him what Wen Qing said about his core, right? Wei Wuxian was often terrible at remembering tasks, but he distinctly recalled completing that one. "I'm banned from resentful energy, doctor's orders."

"Our smiths *can* make sabers without binding an animal spirit, you know. They do make other things."

Wei Wuxian was summarily introduced to the blacksmiths, a married couple who looked him up and down intently and promptly got into an argument over the saber's design. When he looked around for Nie Huaisang, the sneaky little spymaster was missing, because of course he was.

Attempts at interrupting failed to distract the couple from their debate over the pattern to be inscribed on the hilt, so Wei Wuxian settled against the wall to wait, and inadvertently took a nap.

He was prodded awake with the end of a (thankfully) unheated poker. "Infuse this with your energy," The smith holding the poker growled, pointing towards a red-hot block of iron. Wei Wuxian did as requested, feeling only a slight protest from Xue Yang's — his core.

Then, all he had to do was wait.

During the week it took for his new saber to be prepared, Wei Wuxian was not idle.

If he was going to imitate Xue Yang with no demonic cultivation and an extremely temperamental sword, Wei Wuxian needed tricks. Wen Qing had told him to invent something. But, Wei Wuxian thought, how better to create the illusion of evil tricks than to use something that actually existed.

He had drawn one idea from the stage. Why not the methods for a few more?

Within a day of verbalizing his plan, Wei Wuxian drowned under a sea of texts pulled from the shelves of the Nie library and from the private records of Qinghe's theater and dance troops. Thanks to Nie Huaisang's generous patronage, Wei Wuxian had been able to request manuals on the techniques in common between troops, rather than their family secrets. The tricks to raising and lowering a curtain on an improvised stage and to building a smoke bomb in a desired hue for a start.

The combination of practical optical illusions and talismans seemed particularly promising.

The smoke bombs were the easiest, simply a matter of mixing powders together in a casing and setting them on fire. Fun for him, but since he managed to irritate someone no matter where he set them off, Wei Wuxian moved on.

Combining his binding talisman and a sticking talisman, he stuck a disciple to the roof of the library.

(A volunteer, since it wasn't as though Jiang Cheng was there. Or speaking to him.)

The force holding him in place was a standard talisman, nothing Wei Wuxian had invented, but the disciple struggled against it like he'd never learned how to counter it. Which he probably hadn't, given how little thought most cultivators gave them beyond wards and the ubiquitous ones for keeping tea warm or sending brief messages.

Which was precisely why Wei Wuxian might just pull this off.

He thought about pulleys and spirit nets, and the next day, he inscribed the talismans within a pressure-triggered array, and sent himself flying upwards. Followed by a plethora of curious volunteers.

What had he expected, though? The Nie were a sect full of adrenaline junkies. Even the first disciple came around for a turn. After that, Wei Wuxian found himself with company and conversation at every meal.

Even so, he never forgot he was wearing a mask. Every night after a long day of study, the mask weighed heavy on his face, leaving him with a headache. He found it easier to ward his door, than keep it on while he slept. Then, and only then, was it safe to be himself.

Many of the most useful tricks required more practice, such as projecting sounds so they seemed to come from a different source. Wei Wuxian practiced each, over and over again, until he felt he had it. And then put on a demonstration.

When he could pull off a trick successfully in front of the little Nie Disciples, he knew he had managed it. If he still couldn't fool Nie Huaisang, well, Huaisang was Huaisang.

He couldn't be held to mortal standards.

That left one more problem, perhaps the most challenging.

Along with the skin mask, Xue Yang's bag had contained: two changes of clothes, a small pouch of silver, a large coil of rope, and several heavy bags full of corpse powder.

Obviously, Wei Wuxian wasn't actually going to use corpse powder on anyone. That could get messy fast, if anyone else was around, with no guarantee he'd be able to serve the antidote in time. Yet it seemed like corpse powder was a common part of Xue Yang's modus operandi.

If he didn't use it, would Jin Guangyao suspect something was off? There was no way of telling.

The problem niggled at the back of his mind all week long, whether he was becoming one with the library or getting caught in his own rope trap. But he got no closer to finding a solution.

Until finally, during breakfast on the day Wei Wuxian was to receive his saber, he sat staring into his congee, stirring it absently.

And had a brilliant idea.

Somehow, having a potential solution took the edge off his nerves, and he was able to hold Yuanzheng for the first time while only making a bit of a fool of himself. To his relief, it didn't feel like Suibian, though the long, thin saber was also designed for agility rather than power.

Yuanzheng

did feel like a weapon he could use, not the dead, draining weight Suibian had become or the repulsion of Jiangzai. Like it might become an extension of his arm in time, with Suibian and Chenqing out of reach. Wei Wuxian teared up a little, as he went through a series of exercises for the first time in years, and did not pass out.

For the first time, his resurrection really felt like a second chance. The beginning of the long journey he'd named his saber for, with a slim chance that light in the distance was the end of the tunnel. With family and zhiji waiting on the other end.

He had better make it count.

From the privacy of his own room that night, he pulled out his Distance Speaking Stone, and called up Wen Qing. "Hey, disorienting powder can be cleared from the system with congee like corpse powder, right?"

With construction on watchtowers set to begin in several sects, there was little for Jiang Yanli to do on the project but wait. Yet she couldn't remain idle with only her sect responsibilities and A-Ling to occupy her time. Not if she intended to make herself — or rather, Qin Su — a credible power in her own right, someone who had a chance of being believed when it came time to reveal Jin Guangyao's crimes.

She needed a new project. Something Jin Guangyao had yet to present a plan for, something Qin Su would get all the credit for.

Word arrived that a Jin disciple had been murdered by Xue Yang, the juniors he had been escorting barely escaping with their lives. The pair of Jin cousins with the rare tea feud (under a temporary ceasefire in favor of vengeance against the Chief Cultivator for the allowance cut, so far consisting of attempts to convince the servants to put laxatives in his tea, which the servants would not do, out of a desire to remain among the living) fainted dead away at the news.

Jiang Yanli, already aware of this through her brother, attempted to look appropriately horrified.

Jin Guangyao paled, and for a moment, lost his composure. Ice in his eyes and steel in the set of his jaw, there and gone again in a blink. Mask back into place but still off balance, he cut off the junior disciples' explanation of their rescue from corpse powder mid sentence. He immediately sent off three teams of disciples to track down Xue Yang and bring back his body.

"I thought Xiandu always heard all explanations to the end." A messenger from Fengyang Hua whispered to a group consisting of the wards from Lieshan Du, Zhai Xia, and Mo Xuanyu's ever-present suitors.

*Not always, rumor would now say. Even Xiandu is afraid of something.*

Even with fear in the air over the return of Xue Yang — for everyone had a horror story to tell of his time in Koi Tower, mostly to do with dismembered animals in places that were decidedly not the kitchen — Jiang Yanli found she had finally settled into her role.

One day, the paperwork ran out, and Jiang Yanli found herself with an afternoon free. A novel experience, since her return. It was a perfect opportunity to brainstorm her next step.

If only she could dredge up the barest hint of an idea. But her mind felt like a dried-up creek in a drought.

"I was thinking of going to the tailor in the city, Xiao-Heng is growing like a demon and needs more new clothes. Would you like to come with me?"

*I bet we're not thinking of anything because we're trying too hard.* Qin Su said.

As much as Jiang Yanli hated to admit it, she had a point. A-Xian always said that he had his best ideas the moment he stopped trying to force a solution. The difficulty lay in not thinking about it.

*I have a solution for that. My beloved nephew is quite the attention hog.*

"A-Ling's robes *have* been looking rather short." She said aloud.

Qi Juan beamed, and began tucking her son in his sling. He was soon to outgrow it, and had just reached the troublesome learning to crawl stage.

Kidnapping her son from his lessons was a thrill, though it was the work of a moment. The sour-faced calligraphy instructor dismissed A-Ling with visible relief, and the reminder that

A-Ling was still expected to produce ten copies of poems at the next class. *Without* blotches of ink covering half the page, or brush strokes of uneven width.

A-Ling stuck out his tongue behind the instructor's back, and ran to grab her hand, already chattering about how he wanted to bring back sticks of tanghulu for the entire class.

"My sweet, grumpy boy," She ruffled his hair, and he scowled, attempting to push it back into place, but only displacing his top knot further. Just like his jiujiu.

The main streets of Lanling were cleaner than she remembered from six years ago. The shops lining the main street had all recently been given a fresh coat of paint, proprietors and customers alike looking healthier and more prosperous. Jin Guangyao had reformed the city's taxes, on the basis that letting the common people keep more of their earnings now would bring the sect more profit in the long term. More than one person recognized her as Madam Jin, and called out a respectful greeting with a smile. At least on a surface level, his plan had begun to work.

There were fewer brothels now as well, reduced by half. The madams who had refused to start allowing their workers to pay off their contracts had been driven out of business or died in mysterious fires. (In some cases, but not all, the workers mysteriously escaped unscathed.) As A-Ling towed her along to a hawker with a tower of tanghulu, she passed an empty lot with the blackened foundations still visible. The buildings next to it were under repair, one of which seemed to have sustained considerable damage to the living quarters on the second floor.

As she looked around more closely, she saw an emaciated old man begging from the entrance of an alley, a woman in what had once been a set of fine performance robes soliciting passerby, and scruffy children lurking in dark corners.

Despite Jin Guangyao's claims of working towards progress, there were still street children in Lanling.

Making a home for the orphans of Lanling had been a project dear to A-Xuan's heart, in the last months of his life. Impending fatherhood had made him more perceptive in many ways, more so even than the changes he underwent during the Sunshot campaign. But when she was pregnant, her husband had taken her by the arms and informed her with great distress that *there are children in the streets, Yanli! Children!*

Jiang Yanli had thought *better late than never* and helped him come up with a plan. She had her own reasons to take an interest in the care of orphans and poor children, after all.

Jin Guangshan had probably signed the funding out of the budget on an advisor's word, not having been informed how his son and daughter-in-law were spending the clan's funds in the first place.

Jin Guangyao would not have gotten rid of such a program, she thought, as she fished a coin so her son could get as sticky with sugar as his little heart desired.



Qin Su did not quite agree. *No, he would have replaced it with something similar, that he could claim the credit for.*

True. But he hadn't — which meant there was room for Jiang Yanli to fill the gap.

After a moment of thought, she purchased a second stick, and handed it to Qi Juan.

"You looked like you could use it." She told her.

Qi Juan bit down delicately on the candy-coated hawthorn, but couldn't avoid the satisfying crunch. And laughed, as parts of the coating cracked, and fell from her lips. "All right. I haven't had something like this since... before the Sunshot Campaign, probably. Certainly not since my family came up in the world and married me off. You look like you could use one too."

"Do I?" Jiang Yanli had often thought that helping others feel better was its own reward.

*It would make me feel better to taste something sweet.* Qin Su said in a blatant attempt to get Jiang Yanli to treat herself. *Sweet-sweet though, not hawthorn berries.*

I think that stall might be selling lotus mooncakes." Though the mid-autumn festival had already past, there was never a wrong time for a mooncake.

It was a mistake to mention heaven's favorite root in front of Jin Ling. "Lotus!" He shouted. "Pleasepleaseplease mooncake mooncake!" And would not let up until she bought him one, in addition to three for herself.

"That's more than enough sugar for one day, young man." She informed him as she took a bite of her own mooncake, wrapping the others in a cloth for later.

A-Ling grinned toothily up at her, mooncake leaking lotus paste in one hand, half eaten tanghulu in the other, and the glint of sugar all over his cheeks.

Perhaps she should have insisted he wait until after their errand for his treats, but Jiang Yanli did not possess the earned resistance to his adorable whims of a mother who had gotten to see her child grow. Who could blame her, if she spoiled him a little? "Do you think the tailor will still let us in the shop?"

"It's not so bad," Qi Juan said, just as A-Ling smushed the rest of the mooncake in his hand, and shoved it in his face. She grimaced. "I'm certain Tailor Ke has seen worse."

Indeed, Tailor Ke, a woman who knew her way around hanfu, if the way the one she was wearing flattered her extensive curves meant anything, did not blink an eye. "If you could wipe off the young master's hands, please, Jin-furen?"

Jiang Yanli took the offered wet handkerchief, and wiped the stickiness off of a protesting A-Ling. "Of course. I wouldn't want to damage any of your lovely merchandise."

Sadly, the more vibrant fabrics could not be chosen for A-Ling, who would be consigned to golden peacocks and peonies on off-white for as long as he lived. As a married-in spouse,

however, Jiang Yanli had more leeway with under robes. The pale pink of Laoling Qin tempered the gold, making it almost palatable.

Qi Juan freely admired a swatch of vivid green fabric, in precisely the right shade for her natal sect. A daring choice, if it was for her son. Perhaps a sign that Qi Juan would be receptive to opposing her husband.

Tailor Ke bustled around, assembling the appropriate silks in Jin colors for Jiang Yanli's inspection herself.

"Have you been short handed lately?" She asked as ideas for how, exactly, she would go about outdoing Jin Guangyao in reform measures began to coalesce in her mind.

"Have I ever! There's all this new demand for clothing and not enough suitable apprentices to go around! Everyone's looking, not just me." She dropped a stack of fabrics on the table with a grunt. "Jin-gongzi's order will take priority, of course."

She shook her head. Naturally an order from the sect leader's wife would be prioritized, but there was no need. "Please put Bei-gongzi's order ahead of mine. A-Ling can get a bit more use out of his robes, but Bei-gongzi won't fit into his if he grows anymore. And only the peony for embroidery. If it's any more elaborate, A-Ling will inevitably ruin the robes the first time he wears them."

"Yes, Jin-furen." Tailor Ke agreed. "It won't take more than a week, all told. Kid's clothes work up fast."

"And wear out faster." She sighed as A-Ling chose that moment to snag his sleeve on a nail. "What are you looking for, in an apprentice?"

Many craftspeople would have been hesitant to answer, but Tailor Ke was happy to babble on as she began to drape fabrics over A-Ling's shoulders, critiquing and sorting them to find the least aesthetically terrible combinations. "Oh, someone who's quick with their hands, with some basic sewing and embroidery skills. I don't have time to teach basics, but the rest can come along in time. Someone to do the books for me would also be a dream. My eyesight isn't what it used to be, though fortunately I can still stitch a straight seam without looking."

That seemed like simple enough requirements, easily fulfilled with a little education. Though orphans were pulled of the street from time to time, it was usually for menial positions they would lose the moment something went wrong. Or if they were very lucky, to take care of an old, childless widow. Re-instituting A-Xuan's program and improving upon it — that could be a very real way to distinguish Qin Su in the eyes of not only the Jin Sect, but the cultivation world.

The children could not only learn skills to help find employment, but be tested for cultivation potential.

The sects were always complaining about how difficult it was to recruit new talent. Executed properly, Jiang Yanli could make Qin Su look not only kind-hearted, but clever, reputable, and forward thinking, with the best interests of the sect she had married into at heart.

Even if the actual Qin Su fantasized about burning down Koi Tower on a regular basis.

*Hey.*

What? It was true.

*Qin Su huffed. A semi-regular basis, maybe. And I would never actually. I wouldn't actually ruin the whole of Lanling's economy or put the servants and juniors out of house and home.*

*My apologies then.* She suppressed a laugh.

*Would there really be enough apprenticeships to go around, though?* Qin Su sent numbers bouncing around her mind as she attempted the mental math, but got lost without paper.

Perhaps not. But larger farms could use workers, manors could use servants, and affordable bookkeepers were always in short supply. It could, at least, give them a better start.

“Shenshen look! I’m all twirly!” A-Ling giggled as he spun, the silk draped over him spinning out and threatening to knock over the tailor’s basket of supplies. Jiang Yanli tried not to smile, knowing she would need to scold him later, and prepared to pay for the entire bolt.

“We should discuss the problem with your sword.” Wen Qing said one night through the softly glowing Distance Speaking Stone. A-Xian had popped in earlier, briefly, but he was busy following the second of the Jin disciples on Xue Yang’s list, learning the habits of the group they were part of before he could lead them into a trap.

Jiang Yanli stared into her evening tea. “Must we?”

“Wei Wuxian isn’t having trouble with his new saber. The problem must be that Chunsheng doesn’t fully recognize you as Qin Su.”

“I can’t just get rid of her sword.” That wasn’t done.

*<We are not getting rid of Chunsheng.>* Qin Su said from inside her paperman. She’d been bent over a copy of some of A-Xian’s notes, researching something she had yet to explain.

“You’re basically unprotected. What if something —” Wen Qing cut herself off, surprisingly panicked.

Replacing a sword would garner more attention than A-Xian had in refusing to carry Suibian around. Whether they would somehow determine the truth or spread rumors about a disastrous fallout with the Qin clan, *everyone* would know something was off.

Still, it was sweet of her to worry. “Any sword is more protection than I had in my last life, Wen Qing.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” She sounded so forlorn that Jiang Yanli ached with the desire to fall into her arms and rub circles into her back until she slept, and even after. “But I worry.”

So did she, far too often. There was no end to worrying, it seemed. Not even after death. “Does A-Xian have any ideas about the talisman keeping you trapped?”

Wen Qing hesitated. “I haven’t let him look at it yet.”

“A-Qing!” A slip of the tongue, in her shock.

Wen Qing’s breath caught. “I’m not letting him put my life before his again. When we’re closer —”

“Last time you put his life before yours, he died anyways.” Jiang Yanli snapped. And sighed. “I’m sorry, that was unfair. It’s just — if you’re allowed to worry for me, I get to worry for you.”

“A little longer. Then I’ll speak to him.”

She could tell that was the best she was going to get. “If you don’t, I’ll tell him myself.”

Jiang Yanli was tired of watching the people she cared about tear themselves apart. She wouldn’t allow it to happen again.

Wen Qing let out a shaky, hiccupping laugh. “That seems fair.”

## Chapter End Notes

I don't usually give the characters for names but since I'm trying to use the meaning:

Nie Wang: 聂望, hope/to look towards

Nie Xiaomeng: 聂晓梦, where xiao = dawn and meng = dream is a literal translation.

I am sure these are actual names (my usual method is plugging the characters into google scholar to verify they work, and also looking through social media) but if it's not as ironic as I'm thinking for NHS to call WWX that alternatives would be great!

I took the name of WWX's new saber Yuanzheng (远征) from the poem Midnight Song of Wu by Li Bai, which is about wishing for a war to end so the speaker's husband can come home

And happy early birthday to my bff aholeintheground! I may get another chapter out before the actual day, but it won't have your boy (NHS) in it, so this one's for you!

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

One of our co-conspirators is keeping secrets. Jiang Yanli looks at Mo Xuanyu and thinks it's free brother. And Qin Su learns something new about her state of existence.

## Chapter Notes

I'm back! Having to pull together a 25 page report (10 pages of writing, 15 of figures) in two weeks did not leave much time for writing for fun. But that's over now!

CW: more references to past incest, self-sacrificial tendencies (not wwx)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

There could be no doubt that Jin Guangyao worked hard to keep his position as Chief Cultivator secure. On an almost daily basis, he burnt the midnight oil, keeping a tight reign on everything inside and out of Koi Tower. From relations with sect leader, to the living corpse in his secret dungeon, to which candles should be used to entertain the plethora of his distant relatives in their incessant carousing.

Easier now that his sister had resumed her duties with a dedication he hadn't known her capable of.

It was so much easier to think of Qin Su as his sister, when he didn't feel nauseous every time he looked at her, wondering if she might ask for another child.

He could compartmentalize the past. Anxiety over the future was another matter.

There were times when Jin Guangyao still wondered if it was a dream, that she had allowed him Lan Xichen. That waking up in his arms, was no longer only a memory of those few short weeks on the run, but simply his Erge staying in bed long after the Lan hour of waking.

He would have liked to reminisce about the way his Erge had kissed him goodbye when he visited Gusu last week as he scanned through the week's purchase orders. A-Huan had been seated before his mirror, allowing Jin Guangyao to tie on his forehead ribbon before he had to leave. He'd tilted his head up, asking for a kiss from under his lashes, and — Alas, he had company.

“Yao-gege,” Xuanyu whined from where he lay on his stomach with his head propped up on his hands, utterly uncaring of propriety. Even his usual mask was discarded to the side, because for some reason, Xuanyu felt *comfortable* with him. Enough not to care about the scar that slashed from his hairline to the base of his left ear, which he always covered with mask or makeup in public.

Xuanyu thought it ruined his looks, but Jin Guangyao had more than his own fair share of scars. He could attest from personal experience that his Erge at least found scars very sexy.

“Can’t I please go visit Weihai with A-Bo? According to the Yiling Laozu’s weather prediction talisman, it’ll be warm for a few days. I’ve worked hard, don’t I deserve a romantic walk on the beach? I can test that energy enhancement array on the way there.”

Jin Guangyao sighed. For all he liked the boy, he would one day need to dispose of him. He hoped an advantageous marriage alliance to a sect heir would do the trick. Removing Xuanyu from his responsibility in the most respectable way possible, once all of the Yiling Patriarch’s usable inventions had been sorted out, and he’d finally rid himself of Wen Qing.

Whether she’d found a method of strengthening his core or not.

But all that depended on Xuanyu not being caught in the act of demonic cultivation, forcing him to tack on a few additional scandals and send him packing to his mother’s family. That wouldn’t *ruin* Jin Guangyao’s plans per se, but it would certainly not be ideal.

“What would *A-Bo* have to say about that?” He began grinding more ink for something to do with his hands. “Perhaps you should invite Ran-zongzhu’s grandson to practice archery. You’ve been spending so much time with the same two suitors lately.”

Xuanyu made a face. “But Yao-gege! Ran-gongzi is a twig and he only likes girls! It would be far too obvious I’m trying to make them jealous.”

The Ran sect heir would be a far better match than either of Xuanyu’s favorites, but if Xuanyu wasn’t to his taste, there was nothing to be done. And the Du boy showed no signs of interest in anyone, which summed up the male sect heirs around Xuanyu’s age. Maybe when Xuanyu was a few years older, Nie Huaisang would be susceptible to his charms. Thirteen years was hardly an unheard-of age gap between spouses.

In any case, Xuanyu couldn’t be permitted to leave Koi Tower at the moment. “Perhaps when Xue Yang is caught you may take both Bo-gongzi and Kong-gongzi to the lands south of Gusu for a respite from the weather.”

Three of his disciples dead, targeted specifically for their involvement in his less scrupulous work. The same disciples who had apparently misinterpreted his orders for Xue Yang’s disposal as *leave him for dead* rather than *make certain of it*. That he’d merely toyed with the murdered disciples’ companions spoke to his intentions — Xue Yang wanted to ensure Jin Guangyao knew he was coming for him.

So no, Xue Yang’s far less volatile replacement could not be permitted to run off unprotected. His little brother would be no match for Xue Yang in a sword fight. And though Xuanyu had

a talent for demonic cultivation, Xue Yang had a lifetime of experience on him.

“In the meantime, I have a task for you.” He put down the ink stone to give all of his attention to Xuanyu. It worked like a charm, the boy still hungry for approval from family despite his popularity among his own age group.

Jin Guangyao could, unfortunately, relate. If he had simply *let Xichen propose* — but no. He had his Erge now, if not so often as he might wish, and he had power. He would still be seen as that son of a whore sleeping his way to the top if he had married into the Lan.

Becoming Chief Cultivator could never be a mistake.

He shoved the stray thought reminding him that he would not have needed to kill his own son if he had simply married for love firmly into the box where it belonged, and focused on the matter at hand.

Xuanyu was very clever, yet very naïve. Give him an interesting challenge, and he would be distracted from whatever Jin Guangyao wanted him to steer clear of for weeks.

When he was informed of his new task, Xuanyu huffed in annoyance, but his lips curved up in a smile. Finally, he left Jin Guangyao to his work. Teenage temper tantrum averted. For now.

He got back to work, flinching occasionally when the wind slammed the shutters slammed heavily with unusual vengeance. The world seemed determined not to allow him his fantasies tonight, but it did not slow his productivity.

Or it didn’t, until the shutters began to rattle with a persistent rhythm. He put his brush down in its holder, placed a weight on his papers, and stood with the intent to investigate.

The candle on his desk went out, and he drew his sword, channeling just enough energy into it to light the room in with a ghostly glow.

“Yaoyao... Yaoyao...” A hissing, distorted voice seemed to come from the walls.

But only one person had ever called him Yaoyao. “I can have my guards on you in a minute.”

“Can you? What makes you think I’m really here?” Xue Yang cackled, which was somehow *less* horrifying through the distortion. “Did you like my gifts?”

“Your...gifts.” He said, with a sour taste in his mouth. “Contrary to your twisted beliefs, most people do *not* appreciate bodies delivered to them in pieces.”

Dage’s head notwithstanding.

“You tried to kill me, Yaoyao.” Xue Yang whined, the sound crackling and echoing. “And after all we’ve been through together. I killed your father for you. Your enemies. Your son. And this is how you repay me? Shame on you, Yaoyao.”

Fog began to seep through the shutters. Assuming it was poison, Jin Guangyao drew his sword and sent it back out with a burst of spiritual energy. Things like this, he could manage. But it always took more out of him than he would have liked.

Xue Yang must be on the roof, of close enough. But Jin Guangyao was not stupid enough to take him on alone, not without the element of surprise.

“You were always disposable.” He said, careful not to let any hint of fear creep into his voice. “You’re delusional if you think otherwise.”

“Yaoyao, Yaoyao, Yaoyao.” Xue Yang tutted. “I’ve murdered an entire clan. Turned people into puppets for shits and giggles. Wherever did you get the idea I was *rational*?”

The crackle on the last word made him flinch. “If you leave now, perhaps I’ll let you keep your life.”

“Yes, because you’ve done *so well* in your attempts to kill me before.” He could imagine Xue Yang tilting his head up to look at the sky. “Your only disciples who’ve gotten close are the ones I sent back in pieces. Revenge is sweeter than candy.”

Oh good, Xue Yang had gotten more needlessly dramatic in exile.

“So you’re here to kill me then? You’re welcome to try.” If Xue Yang actually dared to set foot in the room, he would come into contact with new wards, a design of Xuanyu’s into which Jin Guangyao had inserted a bit of his own technique.

Something he came across while designing that little trap on the Wen siblings, before he realized how damaging regular use of demonic cultivation would be to his half-grown core.

Xue Yang might get into his room, but he wouldn’t survive it.

“Oh, no. Kill you? How boring. I thought you knew me better than that.”

Torture, then. “I see.”

“It’s not torture if you don’t know I’m going to take everything and everyone away from you.” Xue Yang said cheerfully.

The candle lit itself, and the shutters stopped their rattling, as though Xue Yang had never been.

Take everyone from him. Who could that...?

Even with the half-functional Tiger Seal, Xue Yang was unlikely to try the wards at the Cloud Recesses. He could make it through, but he was no Yiling Patriarch to take on hundreds of the world’s best cultivators and win.

Xuanyu, maybe. Or A-Su. But Xue Yang knew their deaths would benefit him as much as they would hurt. And Xue Yang would not find them so easy targets as he might expect. If he meant to take everyone, yes. But certainly not first.



He should warn Su Minshan, perhaps. The man was the closest thing he had to a friend, now that Erge's love was more than a memory. Even if Su Minshan fancied them closer than they were.

That left —

A-Ling.

His precious, perfect nephew. The boy who would carry on his legacy, many decades into the future, when he'd grown into a model sect leader and Jin Guangyao, aged and brittle in body but as sharp in mind as the day he became Chief Cultivator, stepped benevolently aside in his favor.

He could not afford to lose him.

Jin Guangyao launched himself to his feet and ran for A-Ling's rooms. The guard that should have been stationed outside were nowhere to be seen. He burst inside, panicked.

He wasn't there. His sheets were left disturbed, the room dark. But there were no signs of a struggle, no blood on the floor. Not this time. If A-Ling wasn't here, then...

He ran for his sister's room, pushing past the guards to throw open the doors.

Qin Su looked up, started. A-Ling was cradled in her lap, snuffling into her robes. "A-Ling had a nightmare. What's wrong?"

There had been a time when Wen Qing scolded Wei Wuxian for neglecting his sleep. Now, she was worse than he had ever been. When she slept, it was more often at her desk than in her bed. Lasting until she startled awake, as often from the reminder of her imprisonment as from a nightmare.

Her conversations with Jiang Yanli helped, somewhat. If she lay in bed while they spoke, she might drift off to the sound of Yanli's breathing, and get a few hours in for the night.

Not nearly enough, especially when her world was the extent of two rooms. A single floor of a house, the patter of footsteps above often her only reminder she was not the only person left in all the world.

Until Yanli. But even she, much as Wen Qing treasured their conversations, could only help so much. Even the resurrection of her closest — only — friend could only help so much.

Wen Qing was well aware her situation and sleep deprivation were wearing on her mind. She was well aware of the impact those factors had on her ability to make decisions.

This did nothing to stop her.

Wen Qing was dosing at her desk, waiting for Wei Wuxian to update her on his latest stunt when the front door slammed open. She quickly shoved the Speaking Stone in a box lined

with silencing talismans and opened the nearest text as though she had been reading.

The first thing she noticed was the missing hat.

Though Jin Guangyao did not bother with pretenses in front of her — what did it matter, if a woman both entirely under his power and in possession of much darker secrets saw him scowling? — he always bothered with appearances.

Until now. His hair hung loose, save for a cluster of thin braids framing his face. A Nie habit Jin Guangyao had maintained after all these years, despite having murdered his former sect leader. Even more tellingly, Jin Guangyao had crossed the compound in only two layers of robes. Anyone could have seen him.

Wen Qing would have to give Wei Wuxian her compliments. Though she'd had her doubts, it seemed his gamble had paid off.

She didn't bother to stand and bow.

"I want the formulas to every antidote you know." He snapped. "Remember, I had access to all Wen Ruohan's poisons, same as you. I'll know if something's missing.

Feigning ignorance, she squinted at him through tired eyes. "Antidotes? If someone's poisoned you, and the healers don't know what to do, it's almost certainly too late."

"It's pre-emptive."

He didn't persist in reminding her of his leverage over her, as some villains might have. As Wen Ruohan had done. Jin Guangyao understood that repetition did not make a threat stronger. "I can do that. It'll take a few days if you want accuracy."

All the antidotes in the world would do him little good, anyway. It wasn't as if Wei Wuxian planned to poison him.

Though Wen Qing had made no promises.

"See that it's done." He turned on his heels and stomped — by his standards — petulantly towards the door.

"Jin-zongzhu —"

He stopped short. "Yes?"

"I've been working on an idea, recently." She said, "A mixture of herbs to alter the flow of qi so it's exit slows from the lower dantian. It may make it easier to collect energy into your core."

It wasn't a new idea. It was simply that without Wei Wuxian's plan, she had no guarantee its potential negative side effects would take hold. Jin Guangyao might *actually* have ended up with a stronger core. And that was the last thing Wen Qing wanted.

As Jin Guangyao well knew. “Why would you share this with me?”

“You’re the one that asked for it.” She snapped, and sighed. “If it works, I want to see my brother.”

She hadn’t seen A-Ning since the day he trapped her here. Only the constant burning of the deathtrap on her wrist reassured her he was still alive.

He nodded slowly. “Write up the preparation and what exactly you expect it to do. I’ll have it tested.”

“You’ve mentioned, yes.” That was fine. In the short term, it would seem safe enough.

Wen Qing had tested it on herself, after all.

Jiang Yanli would be upset if she knew, would worry, and insist her plan was enough to save them all. But she didn’t know Jin Guangyao like Wen Qing did.

Yanli was clever and caring and wonderful, like a light at the end of a tunnel she’d thought endless. And that was exactly why she couldn’t predict the cunning knots someone like Jin Guangyao, who had hit rock bottom and kept on digging, would twist his mind into to preserve what he believed he deserved.

Wen Qing imagined her as she’d once been, how Jiang Yanli had bit her lip to hold everything in and together for the sake of her brothers. Yet Wen Qing had been able to see how hollowed out she was from the first glance. She didn’t want to be the cause of the woman she was — of her friend looking like that, not before she had to.

Fortunately, Wen Qing did not expect to survive it.

“Is there anything you need? Books? More tea?” Jin Guangyao was suddenly solicitous. Not an answer she often received.

Wen Qing dug her nails into the palm of her hands. “My freedom, and my brother’s.”

He did not dignify that with a response.

She took the opportunity as offered.

“Books, yes. On possession of inanimate objects. There’s something here.” Wen Qing gestured to one of Wei Wuxian’s journals, which did not in fact contain anything of the sort. “That doesn’t quite make sense the way he wrote it. Anything on the nature of spiritual cognition, and the impact of possession on the soul. There was a Lan scholar who specialized in the latter, I believe.”

She’d come across the scholar’s work in the Lan library years ago, but only skimmed it in her search for something to help A-Ning, or mentions of the Yin Iron.

“I’ll send a request.” He agreed easily — every invention of Wei Wuxian’s he released, claiming to have *removed the safety issues presented by demonic cultivation* was a triumph

for him. “Anything else?”

“A green tea, not from Qishan.” If he brought that same bitter, nostalgic Pu’er again, she would dump a boiling pot of it on his feet. Consequences be damned. “And I’m nearly out of hong huajiao, dried chilis, and sesame seeds.”

After Wei Wuxian’s visit and her unexpected gift, Jin Guangyao must have been in a generous mood.

“Simple enough.” He nodded sharply, and wandered out with a dazed expression on his face.

He would remember, though. Jin Guangyao always remembered.

Mo Xuanyu quite literally fell into Jiang Yanli’s path as she passed by his usual napping wall, having finally managed to send a persistent Zhai Xia off to her drawing class. He scrambled up, and hid himself behind a bush, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

While he clearly wasn’t hurt, Jiang Yanli couldn’t think of an explanation for his behavior. “What are you doing?”

He cracked one eye open behind his mask. “Is it not working?”

“As I have no idea what you’re talking about, I would say no.” She raised a brow, a gesture more characteristic of Qin Su than Jiang Yanli slowly becoming reflex.

“Damn, I was so sure that invisibility talisman would work.” Mo Xuanyu sighed. “Please pretend you didn’t see me fall off the wall, Dasao.”

*He’s such a little monster.* Qin Su grumbled, though Mo Xuanyu was, in fact, slightly taller than Jiang Yanli had been before. And therefore dwarfed her.

Yes, Jiang Yanli replied, delighted.

“If you slept at night, perhaps you would have no reason to fall off walls.” She said aloud, lightly teasing. Despite being surrounded by youths, she couldn’t big-sister them the way she wanted. A-Xian was too far away for the full experience. Jiang Yanli was subsumed with her desire to pinch Mo Xuanyu’s cheeks and inform him he was only one year old.

Mo Xuanyu even looked like A-Xian, a bit. The resemblance didn’t go far, only a little in the shape of his jaw and the tilt of his head. But, Jiang Yanli realized, this was her little brother now. He’d stopped evading her for a moment and now he would never escape. Related by blood or no, she was his jiejie. Those were the rules.

*I should have known he’d blink at you with those cow eyes, and you’d adopt him.* Qin Su sighed mournfully.

Jiang Yanli had wanted to do so from the moment she heard about Mo Xuanyu, that wasn’t news. It wasn’t as though she adopted everyone in need of an older sister, Qin Su and Mo

Xuanyu notwithstanding. She wasn't about to adopt Nie Huaisang, for example.

*That's what you think.*

Mo Xuanyu groaned, stealing her opportunity to reply with the right level of indignation. "Just leave me here to melt into a puddle of shame."

"All right." She didn't want to push too hard, too fast. Mo Xuanyu was barely in her generation, but he required just as careful a touch as the brothers she already new and loved. "Have lunch with me tomorrow. I'd like to hear more about this talisman."

Mo Xuanyu squinted at her. "Um. Okay."

She smiled at him, and turned to leave.

"Wait! I heard about your orphanage project."

She froze. And turned back. "How?"

He shrugged. "You know nothing stays a secret around here."

Jiang Yanli sincerely had her doubts about that, given (1) Jin Guangyao's crimes and (2) her existence. But perhaps she should improve the wards on her office desk, to prevent any rifling through her documents. She had been planning to begin seeking advice on the feasibility of her plans and allocating resources in the next week, but had not yet told even her assistant.

*Tell him exactly this: 'You want to help with politics.'*

She mimicked Qin Su's intonation.

Mo Xuanyu grimaced. "Well, no. But something like this could have really helped me, back with the Mos. Pleeaaaaase? I'm good at persuading stubborn people to listen."

Her brow rose automatically. "Am I a stubborn person?"

"Orphans are a stubborn bunch, Dasao." He grinned innocently, clasping his hands behind his back. This did not dissuade her belief that he had either insulted her, or given a backhanded complement.

"I'll consider it." She barely stopped herself from bopping him on the nose, shaking her finger at him instead. "If you show up to tea and if I see you at my next sword lesson."

"Nooooooo!" He whined, flinging himself onto the dirt.

But he appeared in her office at noon on the dot the next morning. And the next time Jiang Yanli taught the older disciples, Mo Xuanyu stood among them, holding a practice sword like it might turn into a snake and bite him.

Her feet dangled of the edge of the pier, trailing in the water below as she watched her children splash around in the water. A-Ling was a strong swimmer already, determined in his attempts to keep up with his oldest cousin. A-Cheng tread water as he helped her daughter keep afloat while she practiced her strokes, her youngest perched on his shoulders.

Nearby, A-Xian leaned over the edge of his boat to splash his son and nephew when they swam too close, earning sputters of outrage and attempts at splashing back.

Fortunately, the boys were not effective enough in their onslaught to reach Wangji, reclining under his parasol with their newly adopted baby cradled to his chest. A-Qing, however, tackled him out of the boat and left him to the tender mercies of the children. A-Qing's brother was in the kitchen, having won the day's battle over which of them would cook dinner. She'd seen him preparing the dough for thick, hand-pulled biang biang noodles, a favorite of his childhood, in the moments before he'd shooed her out of the kitchens. There would be chili oil for those of them with working taste buds (extra for her and A-Xian), and a sweet vinegar sauce for Zixuan and Wangji.

A-Xuan squeezed her hand and she turned to smile at him. With the sun in his hair, away from his family, and with nothing more to do than watch their children play, he looked more beautiful than ever. Like this was the fulfillment of all his fantasies, just as it was hers.

A wave splashed against the edge of her robe as A-Qing reached the dock. Her lavender inner robe clung to her arms, translucent from the water, so she could appreciate the flex of lean muscle as A-Qing pulled herself up on the dock with a groan.

"I put up with so much for you." A-Qing complained, though she knew A-Qing loved A-Xian just as much as she did. It was good for both of them to have a friend on the same wavelength, to inspire each other to their full potential. And to have spouses like her and Wangji, to remind them to keep safety in mind. She laughed, and A-Qing scrunched up her nose.

Adorable. She leaned in to kiss her—

Qin Su threw herself out of Jiang Yanli and into the nearest receptive object. A candle. From there, she located her paperman.

Shared dreams were one of the least pleasant aspects of her current state of existence.

It could be worse. Jiang Yanli could have been dreaming something naughty about her late husband — she'd warned Qin Su that might happen, and apologized in advance. Fortunately, it seemed mourning had dimmed Jiang Yanli's appetite for Qin Su's long-lost half-brother. Her dreams of Jin Zixuan were domestic fantasies like the one she'd just torn herself out of, or they were nightmares.

Yet as she began to move on — something Jiang Yanli herself did not seem to realize was happening, with the distance of only four months in her memory but six years in her soul — Wen Qing had begun to appear in less than innocent context.

Thankfully, those dreams hadn't started until after Qin Su learned to maintain herself outside her body long enough for one dream to cycle into the next.

What Jiang Yanli had told Jin Guangyao when she gave him permission to pursue Zewu-jun fell short of the truth. Qin Su had never had much interest in sex, beyond as a way to provide her with a child. She hadn't minded the act any more than she minded its absence, fallen easily into — well. She hadn't thought of it as a hardship at the time. Qin Su had thought of it as an enjoyable act to do with someone she believed she loved.

(Of course, she had never really known him.)

When Jin Guangyao had not approached her again, she had not minded.

Qin Su also didn't mind that Jiang Yanli had her fantasies. She simply did not care to experience them. But she always managed to wake up before anything happened.

She climbed onto the windowsill and slipped through the crack between the shutters, in a sort of mood where allowing herself to be carried off by the wind sounded strangely appealing. Even if she were blown away too far to get back easily, Qin Su would snap back into the body that no longer belonged to her when her time away stretched too long.

She'd tested it.

The wind scooped her up, sending the world somersaulting along with her, until her little paper vessel slammed into something feathery and dark.

Then she was falling, landing hard on the roof.

And she felt it.

Papermen could not feel pain. They couldn't feel anything at all, physically. Only the aching chill of resentful energy, or the suffocating warmth of spiritual.

Qin Su tried to move her arm to push herself up, and found it strangely heavy. Lifting her head, she found herself staring at a wing. A wing that appeared to be attached to her. Startled, she accidentally scraped her newfound beak along the tile beneath her, sending a shock of pain through her, and into the mind of the bird she now inhabited.

She could possess living creatures.

That was another check mark in the "I'm dead" column.

Pushing up with the other wing, she was relieved to find it intact. The bird must not have been flying very high when she was blown into its path.

The bird's mind pressed against hers inquisitively, but did not protest. Images of a hoard of things that glittered, and a sense of a question.

Though Qin Su was a temporary inhabitant of the bird's body, it was clear she was the one in control for a change. She wondered if this was what it felt like for Jiang Yanli, with whatever

Qin Su was now inhabiting her mind.

Yes, Qin Su thought. *I know where to find shiny things.*

All she got back was confusion. This bird did not seem to be one of the kinds that understood human speech. She sent an image of the storage halls instead, the one filled with countless little items of gold jewelry, most in the design of peonies or peacocks. This time, the bird was pleased.

With the bird's assistance, she took flight.

For the first time since long before she traded herself for Jiang Yanli, Qin Su felt free.

## Chapter End Notes

WWX imitating XY: finally, a practical use for my PhD in annoying

Hong huajiao = red Sichuan peppercorns

If Qishan was in Shaanxi, the Wens might also like spice! (Disclaimer: My friends like to order habanero guac and give me all the pepper slices. Apparently my spice tolerance is inhuman and should not be trusted.) Shaanxi cuisine sadly doesn't tend to be as easy to find in North America as Cantonese or Taiwanese or even a decent Sichuan place but a good noodle place might have biang biang mian (the best noodle).

I can't believe it took me over 50k to get to the Lan Wangji part of the story but he's in the next chapter and I'm excited!



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Plan “get Jin Ling out of Koi Tower” is a go. Lan Wangji commits to a task he could never complete.

## Chapter Notes

Every time I write about JC from LWJ's perspective I feel like I need a disclaimer. I don't hate JC, but LWJ throwing shade at him brings me joy.

Me: No more OCs!

Also me: you literally foreshadowed Qin Su's siblings showing up from chapter two and there is in fact plot relevance to Jingyi's lesbian moms.

I'm reusing Jingyi's moms' background from my fierce corpse!WQ fic b/c I liked it a lot but did nothing with it

**Content warnings:** Chronic pain as the aftermath of corporal punishment and shock/depression/grief in LWJ POV, panic(?) attack in JYL POV

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

When his uncle and older brother sat Lan Wangji down to tell him the story of his parents' marriage, he was ten years old. He had long since learned that other children got to see their mothers every day and it was only *his* mother who had been confined in a house until she died.

(He had assumed until then that this was a result of some fault in his own character. If he had been better, followed the rules more carefully, A-Niang would not have gone. This revelation did not entirely dispel that perception.)

Lan Wangji had not so much accepted Shufu's story as compartmentalized it, keeping the knowledge of what his mother had done and the question of why as far from his memories of her as he could, to keep those memories forever pure and untainted.

Then, Wei Ying.

Now, Lan Wangji could see that his father, his uncle, the elders, all had chosen trust in authority over learning the truth. Had his mother been a cold-blooded murderer? Had she

been justified? Because they had never asked, he could never know.

Lan Wangji felt his very existence was perhaps the more egregious crime.

His unwillingness to allow the boy who was now his son to suffer that same uncertainty was the primary reason why the first thing Lan Wangji did every morning was determine whether he would need to divert his spiritual energy from his core to his back to get out of bed.

The secondary reason stemmed from Xiongzhong's doubts Lan Wangji would survive three years alone in the Cold Pond Cave.

He could not claim his brother was wrong.

When the elders delivered his sentence, Xiongzhong argued for Lan Wangji to sleep in the Jingshi every night. He argued for A-Yuan to stay with him, for Lan Wangji to have those few precious moments putting him to bed and readying him for the day.

The elders deliberated, and sent Shufu to Lan Wangji with a deal. His sentence would be altered as the sect leader requested: days in seclusion, nights caring for "that mysterious orphan boy." But three years of partial seclusion could not then be counted as sufficient punishment.

This would have been the time where Lan Wangji might have been expected to inquire how much longer would be required. But he simply nodded, numb. A-Yuan was the only thing left that mattered.

But it was not additional time that would be asked of him. Instead, treatment of his wounds would be limited to what was necessary to keep him alive. The properties of the spiritual whip would prevent Lan Wangji's core from healing the damage on its own. The scars left by a mundane healing process would remind him of his transgressions with every movement, for the rest of his life. Neither would he be permitted to seek assistance recovering mentally from his so-called infatuation with evil.

Lan Xichen must be allowed to believe he had gotten his way.

Shufu nearly cried as he begged Lan Wangji not to agree. He could never cultivate to his full potential without healers breaking down the scar tissue that reached deep into his muscles and nerves. He did not want to watch his nephew in pain.

(If he had not wanted his nephew in pain, he should have listened when Lan Wangji asked only to be allowed to help, long before it was too late.)

Feverish and drowning in nightmarish memories, Lan Wangji took the deal.

He never once regretted that decision. If he fainted in the midst of basic sword exercises, conducted in private where no one would notice, he got to hear A-Yuan chatter about his day as Lan Wangji helped brush his hair. If the guqin became his primary weapon on night hunts, his son smuggled rabbits into the Jingshi when he noticed he was listless and sad.

If Xiongzhong offered veiled suggestions that he make an appointment with Tan-daifu at least once a week, A-Yuan listened. Lan Wangji's stories of people he could not know were his family. Of Wei Ying, mostly, but what little he knew of the Wens as well.

A-Yuan became Lan Sizhui and learned and questioned and thrived where Lan Wangji had never had the space to do so.

Having A-Yuan as his son would always be worth it.

The morning the news of Xue Yang's infiltration of Koi Tower reached him was far from his worst pain days. He needed to use his core to lift Bichen above his waist, but he could move with only the twinges and sparks of painful numbness that had almost ceased to bother him.

He had just sheathed Bichen at the end of his routine when a young disciple barreled into his courtyard. "Hanguang-jun! Xue Yang has attacked Koi Tower! Zewu-jun is leaving in an hour."

Lan Wangji immediately retrieved Sizhui from his morning guqin practice and went to intercept his brother.

"Wangji!" Xiongzhong exclaimed upon seeing him. "I'm sorry, I have to leave unexpectedly. I—"

Lan Wangji cut him off with a shake of his head. "I am coming with you, Xiongzhong. Please allow me enough time to leave Sizhui with Qiaohui-tangjie."

Sizhui's shoulders slumped. Lan Wangji had only just returned from an unexpectedly long night hunt a few days earlier. Though he loved Lan Qiaohui and her wife, and their son was his best friend, it was obvious he had hoped Lan Wangji would stay longer.

Unfortunately, hunting down Xue Yang was not a journey on which he could afford to bring his son.

Xiongzhong, on the other hand, slumped with relief. "Yes. Yes, please. I can't offer to track him down myself, but you — thank you."

No thanks were needed. Xiongzhong's married lover had nothing to do with his desire to see Xue Yang's head detach from his shoulders.

Qiaohui-tangjie was out dealing with a matter with the Caiyi Town magistrate when Lan Wangji arrived, but her wife, Fang Xiaorong, was in the process of peeling Jingyi off the roof. She swore vividly as he nearly kicked her in the eye.

The elders would not approve.

It was precisely because the elders disapproved of Lan Wangji leaving his son with his cousin and her wife that he felt it safe to do so.

Once considered a model of a married in Lan spouse — the elders had certainly been pleased that Qiaohui-tangjie chose a wife capable of getting her with child, given the main branch of

their generation's exclusive same-gender attraction — Fang Xiaorong was looked on with suspicion after the Sunshot Campaign as a former outer disciple of Qishan Wen. This despite fighting alongside her new sect while Qiaohui-tangjie stayed back with an infant Jingyi. At first, she had been determined to stick it out. But then Qiaohui-tangjie snuck in visit Lan Wangji while he was bedridden, and learned the truth of the Wen remnants' fate.

The couple moved down the mountain the next day.

“Sizhui!” Jingyi shouted and let go of the roof, his mother barely managing to catch him before he slammed into the ground. He was unphased, expressing his excitement as he dangled upside down by his ankles. “Are you coming to stay again? Please please please say yes!”

Sizhui, who took his duties as the elder of the two by — to their best estimate — a year very seriously, frowned. “You know you shouldn't be climbing on roofs until you can jump onto one in one leap.”

There was in fact a rule against climbing onto roofs at all, among those added after Wei Ying's stay in the Cloud Recesses. As Lan Wangji had not obeyed that rule even before his reinterpretation of the disciplines, he chose to enforce it only as a safety precaution for children. He had been very proud when his son managed it.

And then immediately needed to go cry into a rabbit's fur for several hours over the memories the sight brought back.

“That's no fun.” Making a face, Jingyi pushed off against the ground and flipped to his feet. He grabbed Sizhui by the hand and dragged him inside.

Fang Xiaorong looked after them with fond exasperation. “We're happy to watch him, of course. Would you believe A-Yi's better behaved with your son around?”

Lan Wangji did not doubt it, as both Jingyi's mothers had mentioned this many times. He made a noise of agreement.

“It's just... you only just got back.”

He did not like leaving A-Yuan so soon either. “It appears the Jin Sect did not execute Xue Yang. He is back.”

She grimaced. Fang Xiaorong had married into the Lan Clan shortly after Xue Yang's arrival in Nightless City, but she'd had the misfortune of meeting him. “Well. I hope you can deal with him quickly then.”

As did Lan Wangji.

Xiongzhong was a wreck the whole flight to Lanling, though he didn't show it. Yet he didn't comment on Lan Wangji sitting, rather than standing on Bichen to fly. Sitting, he could fly normally, if a little painfully. Standing, he would have crashed into a tree ten li out. Lan

Wangji did his best to avoid flying with anyone else, these days, but these were extenuating circumstances.

It was a sign of great distress that Jin Guangyao was not waiting for Xiongzhong at the top of the steps when they arrived. The disciple who greeted them gaped at Lan Wangji before shaking himself and directing them to the Chief Cultivator's office.

Su She, of all people, stood at the Chief Cultivator's side, making what seemed to be intended as gestures of comfort. Yet the moment Jin Guangyao lay eyes on Xiongzhong, he stood, abandoning his favorite sycophant.

It was a testament to Jin Guangyao's worry that he skipped his habitual bowing act and grabbed immediately for Xiongzhong's hands. "Thank you so much for coming, Erge. This has all been such a shock."

As though he did not know that Erge would drop nearly anything to be by his side.

Xiongzhong had horrible taste in men.

As he struggled not to grimace, he noticed Madam Jin rolling her eyes. Clearly, she *had* given permission for her husband to take a lover, or her reaction would not have been amusement. Yet it was a strange reaction if she was concerned for her safety. He found it unlikely she did not understand the threat Xue Yang represented.

"Take a seat, please." Jin Guangyao said, finally tearing his eyes from Xiongzhong's, "We're just waiting on — ah."

The doors to the office slammed open, and Lan Wangji was unsurprised to find Jiang Wanyin in the doorway, silhouetted by the afternoon sun. He strode across the room and pulled Jin Ling from his aunt's side and into his arms.

This was only the second time he had seen Jiang Wanyin since he as good as pushed Wei Ying of the cliff.

The first time, Lan Wangji had lost his composure and stormed out at the first jibe. This time the tables would turn. Lan Wangji simply needed to look elsewhere and focus on the matter at hand.

He would not think about the blustering waste of space who thought it appropriate to snatch a child from a grieving mother's arms and had severed the other half of his soul.

"A-Ling can't stay here until that bastard is caught." Jiang Wanyin announced.

"But Jiujiu —" Jin Ling protested, only to be immediately hushed.

Jin Guangyao's mouth twitched at the use of that word. "Perhaps we could start with a summary of the situation."

He launched into his story before Jiang Wanyin could object further, leaving him scowling with his mouth hanging half open. If there was one thing Lan Wangji could respect him for, it

was his ability to silence the most aggravating, bad-tempered dolt in the cultivation world.

Including Sect Leader Yao. Sect Leader Yao had not abandoned and murdered his own brother.

Beyond the technique Xue Yang had used, which could easily have been one of Wei Ying's, the summary contained little to interest him. If all Xue Yang had ever done was torment a few Jins, Lan Wangji would have left him to it. Yet Xue Yang was unlike the handful of dabblers in demonic cultivation he had spirited away from Jiang Wanyin's notice. However few casualties had been left in the wake of Xue Yang's latest quest for revenge, he had much to answer for.

For those he had tormented and slaughtered in the past, and to prevent future damage, Xue Yang must be brought to justice — as Wei Ying would have wanted.

If he was watching, unable to reply to Lan Wangji's Inquiry — despite the fears that wracked him in the darkest hours of restless nights, he did not truly believe Wei Ying would have watched him all these years, and still judged him unfaithful — perhaps ensuring Xue Yang's execution would reassure him that his lantern promise would not go unfulfilled.

So when Jin Guangyao asked, "Hanguang-jun, Jiang-zongzhu, may I count on your assistance in this matter?"

Lan Wangji hummed his agreement before fully processing the question. He experienced a moment of horror at the prospect of working alongside the Fratricide before Jiang Wanyin snorted.

"I'm not dropping all my duties to go haring off across the countryside after your problem. *I'm* not the one who didn't behead that madman when I had the chance."

He could not let that slide without comment. "Sect Leader Jiang is well known for his pursuit of demonic cultivators. It is interesting that he would choose not to pursue one who poses a greater threat."

Jiang Wanyin bristled. "Just what are you suggesting?"

The grating boom of his response made Lan Wangji want to cover his ears. Unfortunately, he was not a child, and so merely flinched internally.

"My brother is simply wondering if something might have come up to prevent Jiang-zongzhu's participation." Xiongzhang offered Jiang Wanyin a placating smile, reaching to squeeze Jin Guangyao's hand.

Lan Wangji was not, in fact, wondering. Xiongzhang's attempts at mediation were unwelcome and unnecessary when both he and the Fratricide knew where they stood. "Jiang Wanyin knows exactly what I am suggesting."

"My jiujiu's not afraid of anything!" Jin Ling insisted from his only living maternal relative's lap.

“Xue Yang is the one demonic cultivator who can’t be him. Happy now?” Jiang Wanyin began to throw up his hands before remembering such an emotional display was beneath the dignity of a sect leader. Not that Jiang Wanyin had any to speak of.

Lan Wangji was never happy. He did not reply. His point had been made.

“Does Hanguang-jun not believe he can bring one demonic cultivator to justice on his own?” Su She sneered.

Lan Wangji did not dignify that with a response. Neither did anyone else.

“Whatever.” Jiang Wanyin huffed. “I’m taking A-Ling back to Lotus Pier. He’ll be safer there.”

“Could you? Oh, please!” Jin-furen gushed in relieved gratitude before Jin Guangyao finished setting his expression to reply.

Lan Wangji could not tell whether Jin Guangyao would have argued had his wife not accepted for him. Jin Guangyao was difficult to read in precisely the opposite way to Lan Wangji. His expressions crafted, rather than seeping through his attempts to keep his emotions inside where they belonged. He didn’t trust it.

Lan Wangji departed Koi Tower as soon as the meeting concluded, following the faint trail Xue Yang had left in his wake.

Jiang Yanli had sent off letters to a select group of sect leaders before the first of Jin Guangyao’s select three arrived. The letters had been written before Wei Wuxian played his part. All she had to do was drop them off, and the fastest courier available carried it away without further permission.

If asked, she could truthfully say she had done nothing after he decided to keep the attack private.

Jiang Yanli had not been entirely certain he would. Though Xue Yang had remained in Koi Tower for months after Jin Guangshan’s demise, it had not been Jin Guangyao who spared his life. She had planned for either outcome. The important thing was that A-Cheng found out, and spirited A-Ling away from the snake pit he stood to inherit.

On that count, matters had proceeded better than expected. A-Cheng had already spirited him away to pack.

*Jiang-zongzhu is very predictable.* Qin Su agreed.

Yet Jiang Yanli had forgotten to consider Lan Wangji. Her considerations had been political, and Lan Wangji was so far removed from politics he might as well have been raising rabbits on the moon. Yet she should have recalled his past with Xue Yang.

She probably should tell A-Xian his future husband was coming to track him down, but — should she really? It would be safer, but unless Lan Wangji literally dropped into his lap, it was likely he would continue to come up with excuses to avoid him. Lan Wangji was not a good liar — and so she had never doubted his dedication to her brother.

She would have to think on it.

She was still thinking about it when the consequences of her letters arrived.

A servant greeted her as she, Jin Guangyao, and his lover exited the office. “Jin-furen, your brother is here to see you.”

It took Jiang Yanli a moment to understand what she meant. From her prospective, one of her brothers had just left, and the other was still helping her son pack for the trip to Lotus Pier.

*Yi-ge?* Qin Su asked, horrified.

Ah.

Qin Su had insisted her favorite sibling was almost never at the family home, and her sister would almost certainly forget to tell him, when they decided together that sending a letter to the Qins was worth the risk. They had thought the result would be Qin Xifeng showing up to see Jin Guangyao. After all, it would be strange for Qin Su to keep Xue Yang’s attack secret from her family, especially if word got out that she had informed a quarter of the sect leaders in her acquaintance.

Apparently, Qin Su’s beloved Yi-ge had decided this was an ideal time to return home.

Jiang Yanli thought this might be a good time to take up swearing.

...*Shit*. Qin Su swore for her.

“Sect Heir Qin is here too, but —”

Qin Xifeng stuck immediately to Jin Guangyao’s side, directing him back into his office, already mid-discussion. Lan Xichen trailed after.

Qin Su and Huiqing had both told her about Qin Xifeng’s alliance with Jin Guangyao, but Jiang Yanli hadn’t spared much time thinking about it.

With the others gone, she had no choice but to turn her attention to Qin Su’s brother. Like her, he was short and round cheeked, though his build was softer, especially in the arch of his shoulders. A cultivator who preferred paperwork. But unlike the woman Jiang Yanli had once been, he carried his sword with a quiet confidence.

“A-Su! Are you all right?” Qin Jianyi squinted at her. “You look pale. Let’s get you somewhere you can sit down.”

“I’m fine.” She pulled away from his grasp. “Yi... ge.”



The endearment stuck like uncooked dough in her mouth.

*Fuck.* Qin Su pronounced with a vehement flatness in the moment before Qin Jianyi stiffened.

Grabbing her by the elbow, he pulled her in to hiss in her face. “What did you do with my sister?”

Clutching Chunsheng’s hilt, she feigned ignorance. “What are you talking about? Yi-ge, I —”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Qin Jianyi yelled — loudly enough to draw attention.

Jiang Yanli’s eyes darted towards the group containing her enemy. Jin Guangyao studied her with “I can explain. Just please, don’t shout.”

“Nothing you say can explain this.” His fist twisted in her sleeve, tight enough that she bit into her tongue trying to keep quiet. Her mouth flooded with copper.

A word from Qin Jianyi could ruin everything. Her hands began to shake, and she clenched them into fists. Instinct screamed at her to freeze as she had when she was young, when A-Niang was in a mood, or faced with her betrothed’s rejection. Jiang Yanli had thought she left that paralysis in the past when she spoke out against the Chief Cultivator-to-be’s attempt to renew her engagement.

Caving to that instinct now invited disaster, but her jaw refused to unhinge. The world receded around her. She clung to reality by her fingertips as her heart threatened to hammer out of her chest.

Why was she reacting like this? It had never been *her* who had reason to flinch from the grasp of her family.

Qin Su popped out of Jiang Yanli’s collar. <Yi-ge! Don’t make a scene!>

Jiang Yanli hadn’t even noticed the absence in her mind.

Startled, Qin Jianyi released her. “A-Su? What...?”

<This is important! Be quiet.> She snapped, with all the whiny petulance granted a youngest sibling.

Even without the benefit of puppy eyes, Qin Jianyi caved to his sister’s demands. “Fine. But I better like the explanation.”

He wouldn’t.

But his acquiescence gave Jiang Yanli the burst of strength she needed to make their excuses. Turning to Jin Guangyao’s group, she gave a shallow bow. “We’ll go first.”

Her erstwhile “husband” and Lan Xichen bowed back, but Qin Xifeng took little notice of her sister’s departure.

Wringing her hands beneath her sleeves the whole while, she took Qin Jianyi to her office.

“Would you like some tea?” Jiang Yanli asked. She did not wait for an answer to begin her preparations. As long as she had something to do with her hands, she wouldn’t break down.

“I’d like to know who I’m speaking to.” His voice was cold, for someone with a tiny paper person climbing his sleeve like it was the steepest mountain in the world.

“Of course.” Jiang Yanli set an empty cup in front of him with a resounding clink. “However, I need your assurance that you will not make any rash decisions regarding the reveal of my identity.”

“You’re possessing my sister! I’ll promise no such thing.”

<She’s not possessing me!> Qin Su insisted.

He scowled, plucking his sister between two fingers so she dangled in the air, a kitten caught by the nape. “What do you call running around in your body then? You’re in a piece of paper!”

Without lungs, Qin Su sighed audibly. <I gave up my body voluntarily. There’s nothing to be done.>

Startled, he dropped her on the table. “Why didn’t you come to me for help?”

Qin Su flipped over so her paper face was pressed into the wood. <I didn’t want you to know. I *still* don’t want you to know.>

“A-Su,” Jiang Yanli said, with her long-practiced gentleness in the face of adversity. She was used to holding everyone around her together when all she wanted was to scream until she went hoarse. This was no different. “I don’t think you have a choice.”

“If you tell me what happened, A-Su, I won’t tell.” Now, Qin Jianyi was softly encouraging, with the realization that he should have lost his sister forever. Yet somehow, she was still there.

A nod of that little paper head, and Qin Su turned to her. <I think I’d like some privacy.>

“Yes, I — I think that would be for the best.” Jiang Yanli attempted to lift the teapot, intending to offer some to her guest before she left. But her hands shook and it rattled against the stovetop. She let it settle back into place, and left without another word.

It was all she could do not to sprint for the one person who felt like shelter, though she was in a place of danger.

As it was, Jiang Yanli walked very quickly towards the kitchens. Anyone who thought to offer to deliver her orders to the kitchen staff took one look at her face, and turned away.

She had crossed the wards and knocked on the window before she gathered the presence of mind to turn away.

It opened almost immediately.

“Yanli?” Wen Qing said. The bags under her eyes were deeper than usual. Jiang Yanli wanted to smooth her thumbs over them until they turned red, with Wen Qing’s head resting in her lap. “You shouldn’t be here!”

She knew that. She did.

She should turn and leave before she did any more damage with her presence here. Which she had, she must have, because everyone she touched crumbled to dust.

But she might crumble if she took one step away, looked away from that beautiful, tired face for even a second. “I know but — I need —”

Wen Qing was unreadable as she opened her arms. “Come here.”

That was all the permission she needed to throw herself over the windowsill and into Wen Qing’s embrace.

“Shh, shh. It’s all right.” Wen Qing hummed a few notes of a Yunmeng lullaby. “Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“I-” She broke off into a sob, shaking her head into Wen Qing’s neck. Unable to articulate why she was reacting this way. Like she had after her parents’ deaths while she huddled in on herself and brother strangled brother in a field.

“Okay. You don’t have to.”

Wen Qing’s hand stroked her back, and that helped. But not as much as the sound of her voice.

“Keep talking. Please.” She begged, tears staining Wen Qing’s robes.

“About what?”

“Tell me about what you’ve been researching?”

“There was a cultivator in the generation after Wen Mao who tied their soul to a water clock at the time of their death. From then on, the clock was always exactly on time, whereas before, it stuck on one cog for a few seconds with every rotation.” Wen Qing had also raised a brother, and her voice took on that peculiar quality of an experienced storyteller. “When a Lan disciple came to perform inquiry, the ghost replied Only when a new water clock was built and tested to exacting standards, and the old torn down, did the ghost agree to move on.”

As Wen Qing spoke, her heart calmed until the rest of its speed could only be attributed to Wen Qing’s proximity, a fact she purposefully ignored. She slid down into her lap. “I wish I was that petty.”

Wen Qing snorted. “You are, A-Li.”

Her breath caught. “Did you just call me...? Do it again.”

Jiang Yanli could not think about why she responded to the endearment the way she did. But she needed to hear it again.

“A-Li.” She repeated, sounding relieved for some reason. “Did you know that Qinghe has an unusually high rate of possessions? Those saber spirits of those are magnets for resentment.”

Humming, Jiang Yanli turned her face into her skirts. Wen Qing’s lap was a very comfortable place.

She stayed there, long after she remembered this was the last place she should be.

Wen Qing held her tight and did not tell her to go again. Only when Jiang Yanli pulled away, remembering that she needed to show her face at dinner with A-Cheng and Lan Xichen, did Wen Qing remind her that she needed to keep her distance.

This time, Qin Su’s Yi-ge vouched for her, taking responsibility for stealing his sister away from her duties. And it was not, technically, a lie.

She could not allow this to happen again.

Qin Su returned to her for the duration of the meal, and returned to her brother.

Qin Xifeng continued her discussions with Jin Guangyao, never noticing a thing.

Yet that gave her an idea.

Later that evening, Jiang Yanli called Nie Huaisang. Perhaps he could spare a few of his not-spies to track someone down.

Even later, she called Wen Qing. She picked up her stone, though it was late enough that she should have been asleep.

(Jiang Yanli had suspicions regarding A-Qing’s sleep habits that she had not yet figured out how to address.)

She intended to assure her that she was fine. But instead, she found herself spilling the whole story.

Wei Wuxian checked to make sure the mask of pretty, young Nie Xiaomeng was back in place before he exited his room. Laughter and the clanking of dishes echoed up the stairs from the common room of the inn. He steeled himself before taking the first step.

It was surprising how often he heard rumors about himself, despite the passage of six years since his death. Accompanied by hideous portraits he couldn’t even say anything about. If anything, Nie Xiaomeng should encourage slander against the Yiling Patriarch.

Today, however, he was not the topic of conversation.

At least, not as himself.

“I got this here scar from Xue Yang himself!” One very drunk cultivator among a group of brawny gossips — some cultivators, some not, but all mercenaries — pulled all his layers down to show off a vivid white scar on his brown bicep. “Scrawny little brute, but vicious like — like one of them what do’ya call’um. Krait. Them tiny snakes down south that’ll kill ya before’ya know it.”

His friends for the night murmured their appreciation. One, who seemed to have hopes of getting lucky, boldly reached over to trace the scar.

None of the group were Jin, of course. He tried to avoid Jin cultivators as much as possible, though he had not always been able to avoid it. Supposedly, Nie Xiaomeng was leisurely tracking Xue Yang to avoid having to return home.

Target number four was currently staying on the other side of town, his tracking team so far dutifully taking the baited trail of Xue Yang appearances.

“Did you hear he’s back? Xue Yang, that is.” Wei Wuxian slid into the group with a half dozen bottles of baijiu dangling from his grasp, and he was accepted in like an old friend. Only when the other bottles had been claimed did he bring out his own bottle of warm Huangjiu — the resentment in Xue Yang’s core did *not* help with the growing chill in the air, and Wei Wuxian didn’t much like getting drunk without someone around to catch him if he fell.

A non-cultivator mercenary with origins from somewhere along the sea route of the Silk Road scowled. She seemed to be less inebriated than the rest of the lot. “Xue Yang, you say? I thought he was executed by the Jin! Are you sure it’s him?”

“Oh, I’m certain.” Wei Wuxian said. “I heard it straight from the mouth of a Jin disciple on the hunt. Xue Yang got into the rooms of Jin-zongzhu himself and left a love letter and a dead mouse!”

“A love letter?” Bicep Scar gasped, so perhaps Touchy-Feely was barking up the right tree.

“Can you keep a secret? I was told this in confidence.” Wei Wuxian leaned in towards the center of the table, bringing up a hand to frame the opposite cheek.

“I can keep a secret, sure.” Bicep Scar assured him.

He was counting on that being a lie.

“The Chief Cultivator was having a secret affair with Xue Yang! Before his ascension, of course.” Wei Wuxian conveyed the lies in a mock whisper.

“What nonsense. Go sell your bullshit somewhere else.” Skeptic Sober Jiejie scoffed.

Bicep Scar tilted his head, slurring, “I dunno, he kicked Xue- Xue Yang outta Koi Tower.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Skeptic Sober Jiejie snorted. One of the less talkative mercenaries at the table nodded their agreement.

“Sure. But he didn’t do it immediately.” Unlike Bicep Scar, Touchy Feely’s romantic side had a limit. Maybe it would be Bicep Scar who ended up with a broken heart.

“Tha’s true.” Bicep Scar’s eyes went wide as he looked back at Wei Wuxian. “How do’ya know?”

“I had the misfortune of meeting Xue Yang years back. He wanted me to *tie him up*. We’d only just met.” A slight reinterpretation of events. Wei Wuxian had already tied Xue Yang up before he was unwillingly informed said recently captured mass murderer was into it. “I refused, and he said my yaoy— yao- y- I can’t repeat it.”

Wei Wuxian didn’t, actually, have anything against the idea consensual bondage. It was simply that Xue Yang made every situation creepier by existence, even if he was already dead.

“Xiandu’s a sadist?” Touchy Feely gasped.

Bicep Scar deflated sadly. “His poor wife...”

“I wonder if she’d be interested in a strapping young cultivator...” A young man with an unfortunate goatee wondered.

“Strapping? You?” Skeptic Sober Jiejie sealed her lips shut, holding up a finger. A second later she sputtered and buried her head in her arms, shaking with laughter as the others chimed in with increasingly wild speculations.

Wei Wuxian’s work here was done.

He slipped out of the discussion and went upstairs to get what sleep he could.

## Chapter End Notes

Tan-daifu (therapist Lan disciple from chapter 2) does not know that LWJ is not allowed to ask for help :(

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji begins his hunt for Xue Yang - and is very good at his job. Jiang Yanli may have made a mistake. Wei Wuxian would like this to not be happening.

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this one! I realized the deadline for a prompt I was filling was coming up just after my parents arrive to visit me (for the first time since January 2020) so I kind of rushed to finish that in the interest of not having to write smut around them

**Content warnings:** a little bit of gore, more of lwj's chronic pain, fainting

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Lan Wangji did not understand why the Jin disciples were having so much difficulty catching Xue Yang. He wasn't even attempting to hide his trail.

The answer could only be the eternal ineptitude of the Jin Sect.

The snake who had slithered his way into his brother's heart might have proven his logistical competence. There were certainly fewer "miscalculations" in the tariffs charged to Gusu merchants in Lanling in the past year. But no amount of logistics could salvage decades of Jin Guangshan's idea of discipline.

Which was why Lan Wangji found himself sighing heavily as a servant at the northern Lanling inn nervously informed him that the team of Jin disciples had just departed. At dusk, despite their promises to follow his lead to surprise Xue Yang in the early hours of the morning.

"A dead bird with a note crashed through the window and — they were drunk, and one of them said something about not wanting Hanguang-jun to steal their glory." The servant said, and zipped his mouth shut, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

There were nine disciples in the group. They were all obnoxious.

Though Lan Wangji had no desire to work with them, he had offered his assistance in the hope that shared credit would dissuade them from anything rash. He had not been aware the staff was listening in.

He was tempted to allow the undisciplined drunkards to face the consequences of their own actions. Full-grown disciples of the sect that had called most strongly for Wei Ying's downfall were not the innocents he had sworn to protect.

The next person to cross Xue Yang's path after he escaped from them likely would be.

Perhaps he should not have made the offer of assistance in the first place.

With a longing glance at his barely touched bedtime tea, Lan Wangji rose to don his wool-lined winter cloak. The way his back protested the movement was average at best. Little more than he had dealt with while kneeling. He did not worry whether the pain showed on his face.

Though many in the Cloud Recesses lined their woolen winter garments with the fur of rabbits that had died naturally in the previous year, Lan Wangji had asked the tailor in Caiyi to add what they had on hand. He could not stand the idea of wearing his companions. The result was the most color he wore, after Wei Ying, of golden-brown fox fur on white wool.

When Lan Wangji had first tried on the cloak, he had heard Wei Ying's voice in his head so clearly, he could have been present. *So beautiful, Lan Zhan. I'm going to swoon into your arms, may your future spouse forgive me.*

(Wei Ying had called him handsome, more often, to his face. But once, tipsy and honest, Wei Ying had called him beautiful in a dozen ways. Though Lan Wangji had been too scared to grasp what would prove to be his final unfettered chance, beautiful seemed the more honest word.)

So he wore the cloak, despite his displeasure at breaking what little mourning he was permitted — there was nothing that could be said against white garments with sparse pale blue embroidery, for it was not so different from what he had worn before — in wearing it.

He did not often need winter garments in his travels, away from the Cloud Recesses' high elevation, but he did not often come this far north. However, he had overheard the locals discussing the how the Yellow River had frozen over a month early.

The Jin disciples' trail was even more obvious than Xue Yang's. Seated on Bichen, he was able to follow their drunken stumbling as easily as a flare.

Xue Yang had led them into the gutted, post-harvest fields near the village, and he found them at the rocky ice-covered river's edge.

Several of the Jin disciples were rooted into place, struggling against their bonds. Xue Yang cackled as three remaining disciples attempted to attack him at once, dodging out of their paths so two crashed against each other, toppling onto the ice.

The third turned on Xue Yang, and he toyed with her as though she was nothing more than a child still learning how to hold a sword.

Soon enough, the disciple faltered, and Lan Wangji flew in the way of the blow that was to follow, his guqin hovering at the ready at his fingertips.



Xue Yang's eyes widened, and he jerked back, shock and something unreadable in his expression.

For a fraction of a second, Lan Wangji's eyes met his, and everything felt slightly off.

In Lan Wangji's memory, Xue Yang had not been so tall. Lan Wangji was certain Wei Ying had dwarfed him, when Xue Yang was bound, and Lan Wangji was left wishing for things that would never be his.

In Lan Wangji's memory, there had never been anything but murder in Xue Yang's eyes.

But Wei Ying dwarfed everyone in his memory, so he pushed the strangeness aside, and let the moment pass.

Chord assassination sprung from his fingertips.

But Xue Yang dodged.

He tried again, and again, and Xue Yang was always just slightly out of range.

If Lan Wangji could move like he had when he was younger, he would have made short work of Xue Yang. It was his weakness that gave Xue Yang the opportunity to reach into his sleeve, and retrieve a handful of powder, along with a firecracker.

He sent both flying.

Lan Wangji covered his mouth with his sleeve, and held his breath as he directed Bichen to sail above the cloud of powder. He was already too late to see where Xue Yang had gone.

Which meant Lan Wangji was responsible for diagnosing the Jin disciples with presumed corpse poisoning, and dragging them back to the inn for congee.

Only it seemed a Nie disciple, who Lan Wangji did not recall seeing in the inn earlier, had prepared in advance. They were greeted with the pre-prepared meal at the entrance to the inn.

The Nie disciple was tall and broad shouldered, as might be expected, but with a build more suited to agility than the brute force of saber cultivation. His features were beautiful, in an aesthetic sense. If he had stood still for a moment, Lan Wangji might have mistaken him for a painting.

Yet he was in constant motion, darting, bee-like from cultivator to cultivator, delivering renewal in the form of brilliant-red congee.

Wei Ying was always in motion in his mind's eye, never stuck in that eerie stillness of his darkest moments. Wei Ying had heaped chilies on his dishes on the way to Tanzhou, devouring them like candy, all the while sneakily peeling loquats and dropping them into Lan Wangji's bowl while he was distracted by drops of oil on Wei Ying's lips.

He started to rise, moving slowly as his spine protested. Lan Wangji did not understand why his lower back hurt at times, with a sharp intensity that contrasted the ever-present burrowing

ache across his shoulder blades. It started not long after his morning exercises the day before, and he knew from experience it would fade in a few days.

He moved too slow, and the Nie turned storm-cloud gray eyes on him that sent a thunderclap through his chest. “Ah, Hanguang-jun. You didn’t inhale any of what they did, did you?”

He shook his head once. Though no one had thought to warn him, Lan Wangji knew better than to inhale a mystery powder. “How did you know to have congee prepared?”

“These idiots keep falling for that same trick. It seemed a sound bet.” His grin seemed oddly restrained, his laugh purposefully stifled.

Lan Wangji hummed his agreement. But somehow, that did not seem to be enough. “It was. You demonstrated the appropriate forethought.”

The Nie disciple’s mouth fell open as he made a concerning noise in his throat.

“I’m sorry, L- Hanguang-jun. I have to go. Over there.” He grabbed a bowl out from under one of the Jin disciples as she attempted to replace her spoon. He plucked the spoon from her hand before darting off towards the kitchen door, only to be barred from entry by a frowning server. He grinned at her, wider and more natural.

For unknown reasons, Lan Wangji’s ears heated.

The Jin disciple whose bowl he had pilfered clucked her tongue and said to the table at large, “Ah, that Nie Xiaomeng. Quite the character. I’ve never seen him so flustered.”

Lan Wangji stood, and brought the rest of his meal to his room. It did not matter why this Nie Xiaomeng seemed so familiar. All he needed was to bring Xue Yang to justice, and return to his son.

The next morning, one of the Jins was found dangling from her own window by her own intestines. The only mercy was that her throat had been cut before she was gutted.

In hindsight, Lan Wangji would find it obvious that any show of mercy could not have come from Xue Yang.

The winter would be a cold one. The wind howled outside her office door, carrying more snow than Jiang Yanli had ever seen in its wake. The scholars were saying this would be the coldest winter in decades, that Lanling Jin and neighboring sects would be subject to storm on the heel of storm, that each inhabited building should keep stocks of water, dried goods, and firewood on hand in case they were snowed in overnight.

Jiang Yanli was deeply jealous of her brother. The winds in Lotus Pier could be a trial in the coldest months, but it rarely snowed, and there were no flights of iced over stairs to slip down.

She added another log to the fire, stirring the coals as the current candidate to run Lanling's first orphanage summarized her position on appropriate learning hours. Already, Madame Long, a weathered, middle-aged woman who worked in the city magistrate's office, was among the best candidates thus far, as she did not believe every waking hour outside class should be consumed with chores.

But in some ways, it was not her opinion that was the most important.

Mo Xuanyu leaned forward in his chair, resting his chin on steepled fingers. "What would you do if you caught one of your charges stealing?"

"From where?" Madame Long asked.

"From the pantry, from a store, from you personally, does it matter?" His tone was flippant, but Mo Xuanyu was much like A-Xian in the metaphorical masks he wore. These days, in wearing physical ones as well.

Madame Long hesitated, seeming to sense that - another point in her favor. "It does."

Mo Xuanyu spread his hands wide. "Please, educate me."

"If a child steals from the pantry, they are likely hoarding for expected food shortages. Punishment for a first offense would be counterproductive." She said. "Stealing from a store, I would have them learn the work that goes into the product stolen. By having them knead all the morning bread, say. Stealing from me — that's a removal of privileges."

Mo Xuanyu leaned back heavily, surprise showing in his voice. "You wouldn't order a beating?"

Madame Long's mouth twisted in disgust. "Who ever learned anything from a beating?"

Mo Xuanyu opened his mouth, and nothing but a squeak came out.

Jiang Yanli stepped in. "You speak from experience."

"I was lucky to have a childless couple take me in," she said. "I never learned anything until they did."

She was the first person they had interviewed to answer that question adequately. Jiang Yanli hired her on the spot.

Knowing as she did of his demonic cultivation, Jiang Yanli had not wanted to accept Mo Xuanyu's assistance with her project. A strong loyalty to Jin Guangyao could only be expected.

Yet he, with his personal experience as a functional orphan in a hostile environment, had proved very effective in determining who *not* to hire.

Besides that, Mo Xuanyu was charming and vivacious, if prone to bouts of melancholy during which he needed to be dragged from bed. Among his own generation, he was the only

young master of the four great sects. Some of the admiration was genuine, some no doubt faked in the hopes of favors. All of it was useful. If she could shift his loyalties, with the right evidence, Mo Xuanyu alone could sway several sects.

Though Qin Su was out, soaring high in the clouds in a bird's body, Jiang Yanli could almost hear her doubt. She remained convinced that Jiang Yanli was on a mission to adopt every insufficiently parented child in sight.

If that were true, she would not be planning an orphanage. The street children of Lanling would already have moved into Koi Tower.

When Jiang Yanli sent a letter to Tan-daifu on both her on and Qin Su's behalf after her brother's visit, she had also described Mo Xuanyu's symptoms. He had written back, instructing her to have the sect physicians mix a medicine that might help balance his moods. She had yet to convince Mo Xuanyu to try it.

After Madame Long departed, she turned to Mo Xuanyu. She couldn't see much of his expression, but his hands shook, and his breath came loud and fast. "A-Yu. Would you like a hug?"

"A...hug?" He asked, treating the word like it might summon a demon king.

"I put my arms around you, and you maybe feel better." She said, with that light, playful sarcasm that worked so well on all of her boys.

He looked down and sniffed loudly before replying, mouse-like, "Yes, please," and shuffling into her open arms. There was a porcelain fragility to him that was not apparent before, as though this scrap of affection might hold a trap.

"Shh." She smoothed a hand over his hair, soothing him by increments until he relaxed into her with a long, heavy exhale.

Perhaps, if she showed him that he could trust her, he might change his mind.

Or so she thought, until the last person she wanted to know about it walked in on her next meeting with the future orphanage mistress.

It was not a surprise that he had learned of the project. Jiang Yanli had expected that if Mo Xuanyu knew, so did Jin Guangyao. It *was* a surprise that he knew of this meeting.

"Madame Long, is it?" Jin Guangyao's smile was that of a merchant who had just sold a five-year-old's ink painting for gold. "Welcome to the team. We're so very excited for this new initiative to begin. Let's review the plan from the top, shall we?"

He led the discussion as though this had all been his idea, and Jiang Yanli merely his arbitrator. Madame Long fell for the false sincerity of his dimples as had so many others. She could do nothing but dig her nails into her palms and smile as Qin Su seethed.

When Madame Long had departed, Jin Guangyao remained behind. "I was surprised to hear of the project! Why didn't you tell me about it?"

She looked away, hoping she appeared bashful. “I wanted to tell you when it was closer to completion. This is the first time I’m doing something like this and — are you angry?”

“No, no. Of course not. By the way, did you argue with your brother? You didn’t spar as you usually would.” Jin Guangyao turned the full force of his dimples on her.

Fortunately, Jiang Yanli was immune.

Qin Jianyi had remained in Lanling for a few days after his older sister’s departure, though he had not been able to stay away from his duties for long. But before he left, he personally cooked all of Qin Su’s favorite dishes, and insisted Jiang Yanli eat them so his sister could taste them.

His sister might not need to eat anymore, but he could still feed her soul.

Jiang Yanli would have gotten along with him very well, had he not resented her for taking what his sister had given.

When Jiang Yanli had stuffed herself full of more braised prawn and candied yams than could reasonably fit in her stomach, Qin Su slipped out of her mind and into a songbird roosting on the roof. She flew it in the open window, and landed in her brother’s hair, proceeding to mess with his hair with her beak and talons.

Like A-Cheng to A-Xian, only considerably less violent.

“Jie...” He sighed, moving Qin Su onto the table, only for her to hop right back up. “If you want Laoling’s support in removing Jin Guangyao, she’s the one you’ll need to convince. We didn’t want to worry you, A-Su, but father’s memory is getting worse. He’s taken a step back to try to slow the deterioration. Jie is effectively sect leader.”

“Qin Xifeng and Jin Guangyao seem quite close.” She said.

“It won’t be easy.” He agreed. “But if you can convince her he was involved in Jin Zixuan’s death, that’s the one thing that could persuade her.”

“Because A-Xuan’s death is the reason she turned away from her sworn sibling.” Another reason she needed Mo Xuanyu - the only free, living witness to Jin Guangyao’s research in demonic cultivation other than Su She. And Su She would be sacrificed for A-Xian as soon as the less prominent disciples were taken care of.

He nodded. “I have heard *many times* how Jin Huiqing marrying out and Luo-guniang leaving the sect as good as killed him.” “Sometimes I think they could have settled everything years ago if they just yelled at each other. But Jin Huiqing doesn’t yell.”

“More likely they would have died at his side.” It seemed it was Jiang Yanli’s fate in both her lives to settle arguments she had not started. Or perhaps — “Luo-guniang. Do you know where she is?”

He frowned. “No one does. Why do you ask?”

Jiang Yanli felt the corners of her lips turn up for the first time in days. “Jin Huiqing might not yell. But Luo Qingyang does.”

So, no, she had not sparred with Qin Su’s brother. According to Qin Su, he was not an expert swordsman by any means, and Jiang Yanli would have acquitted herself well. Qin Jianyi did not want to pretend she was his sister anymore than he had to. And they had more important things on their minds.

“Yi-ge was just worried about me.” She told Jin Guangyao. “He fussed.”

Jin Guangyao grabbed her hand, and she couldn’t quite tell if his concern was real. “Our new understanding doesn’t mean I’m not here for you. You will always be my wife, A-Su. You can still tell me these things.”

“Of course, A-Yao.” She gave him a bland smile. “I’m not keeping any secrets you should know about.”

Which was, of course, the truth.

Wei Wuxian had never faced such betrayal from his own sister! She *had* to have known Lan Zhan was after Xue Yang. And yet, not a single word of warning to prepare him for the sight of his zhiji, who had only grown more effortlessly powerful, more irresistibly magnetizing in the years he missed, trying to kill him.

In his room in an inn that did *not* contain Lan Zhan, he sprawled against the bed frame, pouting at his Speaking Stone like she could see him across the distance.

“Shijie,” he whined before she could greet him. “Why didn’t you tell me Lan Zhan was after Xue Yang?”

“Oh.” She had meant to think about it and then — “I’m sorry A-Xian. So much happened right after. But you did want to see him, didn’t you?”

“Not like this! Not as — as *Xue Yang*!” “He’s the most stubborn, wonderful man in the world. He’s not going to just give up, no matter how many times I run away. What do I do?”

She hummed in a way that let him predict her words. “Sometimes there’s no good option. But there may be one that’s best for you.”

“Shijie. That’s not helpful.”

Wei Wuxian was having a crisis and would like explicit instructions please.

But Shijie refused to provide them. “I think Xianxian will know what to do when it’s time.”

“*Shijie*.”

“Remember you need to come back soon for your treatment.” She said brightly, effectively ending the conversation. There was no going back to a conversation Shijie had deemed closed. Though Shijie couldn’t physically frown at him in disappointment over Speaking Stone, and she no longer had possession of her own face, he would feel her disappointment if he tried.

He sighed. “Yes, Shijie.”

She asked him how his day had gone otherwise, and that was that.

Wei Wuxian was *maybe* a little irritated with her still. She’d never done what she believed was best for him without asking before. First with his resurrection — though, admittedly, he hadn’t exactly been available for consultation — and now with Lan Zhan. Sure, she said she’d forgotten, but he wasn’t entirely certain he believed her.

Shijie had never believably lied to him before either.

Wei Wuxian supposed he was getting a taste of his own medicine.

He didn’t like it.

Unless Wei Wuxian dropped the Xue Yang act completely, there was little he could do to avoid Lan Zhan. And he couldn’t do that because they had a *plan*.

It felt like no time at all before he was staring the matchless Hanguang-jun down on the edge of a tree-lined cliff.

Once again, Lan Zhan was seated on his sword, his guqin floating under his hands in a halo of spiritual energy, positioned between him and his target.

Lovely, graceful, beguiling Lan Zhan, fire in his eyes and more beautiful than ever. That cloak billowing out behind him was a weapon all on its own.

Under the right circumstances, there were few things Wei Wuxian would have enjoyed more than fighting him.

These were not the right circumstances.

He had lured the latest team of Jin disciples who were under the impression they were the ones hunting him off the road. They were traveling towards Xue Yang’s last known location — a village where he’d stood on the roof of a barn and cackled for a while, and made it sound like the ghosts in the graveyard were restless for a bit — in the hope that Lan Zhan would continue on to the village.

All he had to do was throw a rock at one cultivator’s shoulder, show Xue Yang’s face, and run into the cover of the trees. They crashed, yelling, into the undergrowth after him, despite the ensuing dusk.

His little ambush had been off to a promising start: cultivators stepping into arrays without watching where they were stepping, the others distracted by their companions' plight so he could easily hit them with talismans. The average Jin disciple, he had found, was not up to the standards met by the weakest of the Jiang, or Lan, or Nie. Even those who joined Shijie's Peacock during the Sunshot Campaign had been more competent. Before Lan Zhan, that first group of kids had been his biggest challenge, and they hadn't known to expect him.

This group probably hadn't even read the damn reports from the teams he'd tangled with before. Wei Wuxian had had a reputation for flippancy, before he had a reputation for grave desecration and mass murder, but even he had done his research.

While Wei Wuxian was throwing smoke bomb full of disorienting powder at some cultivators he'd stuck up in a tree, things went down hill. One of the Jin disciples had something in their head other than dust, and had stayed behind, waiting for Hanguang-jun.

Wei Wuxian lunged for the cultivator on Xue Yang's list, trying to cut his losses and run, but Lan Zhan put himself between them. He was already pulling his blow when the wave of spiritual energy hit him, so like the chords of Lan Yi, down to the mournful vibration it inspired in his heart.

There was time still to find cultivator number five again, before his deadline. Even Lan Zhan could only be in one place at a time, no matter what a selfish part of him had wished in another life.

He launched himself into the treetops, avoiding the branches from which golden-robed cultivators dangled like belt ornaments. Leaping from tree to tree, he tried to gain enough distance that it wouldn't be obvious the sword he was riding was not Jiangzai, which would be all too happy to throw him off the cliff if he tried.

Realizing he was about to escape once again, Lan Zhan flew up to confront him, leaping smoothing off his sword, and onto the branch in his path. Jiangzai clashed against Bichen, and Wei Wuxian was instantly thrown back to a moonlit rooftop almost a decade in the past.

The moon was not yet high in the sky, but Lan Zhan glowed under the pink-orange haze of sunset. And just like then, Lan Zhan did not yet know him.

He back-flipped away to another branch, and Lan Zhan followed, weaving Bichen in a fluid series of blows so precise and deadly that Wei Wuxian was forced to fall back on Jiang techniques just to parry, and keep moving.

As expected of Lan Zhan. He had watched with pride and five kinds of longing as Lan Zhan's skill increase in leaps and bounds during the Sunshot campaign, until Wei Wuxian could no longer have matched him were he to spontaneously grow a golden power equal in strength to his old one.

Xue Yang's had been strong, but corrupted. *Close* to where Wei Wuxian had been a decade earlier, but nowhere near where Lan Zhan must be now.



Their fight brought them further along the cliff, away from where the Jin disciples could witness. Wei Wuxian found himself tiring quickly, sweating into his robes despite the chill. His winter cloak weighed heavily, threatening to drag him to the ground with the slightest misstep.

There was a glimmer of sweat on Lan Zhan's forehead, too, which couldn't be right. Wei Wuxian no longer had the skill to make Lan Zhan break a sweat. He jumped back from a slashing upswing just in time to avoid being gutted, but the blow cut through his robes, leaving a thin, red line on his skin.

He pulled the knot of his cloak undone, and threw it into Lan Zhan's face, using the moment of delay to drop to the ground and run for the cliff. But once again, Lan Zhan was too fast for him, sending Bichen to halt him in his path. The sword pushed hard on Jiangzai with even more force than Lan Zhan had used himself. By the time Wei Wuxian sent Bichen flying back to its master, Lan Zhan was landing square in his path with a strange stumble and wince.

His heart sparked in concern, wondering if Lan Zhan had been injured in a night hunt along the way. If he'd neglected his injuries to chase justice.

Now Wei Wuxian needed to end this quickly for Lan Zhan's sake as well as his own.

For the first time, he sent Jiangzai flying. There was a reason he didn't do this, a reason why he always engaged hand to hand. Where Qin Su's sword merely sapped Shijie's energy, Jiangzai had a mind of its own. Even in Wei Wuxian's hand, it still resisted channeling the simplest bolt of spiritual energy. Set free, there was no telling what path it would take.

When Jiangzai's hilt left his hand, Wei Wuxian had no doubt Lan Zhan would be able to handle it. Jiangzai was a sword nurtured on anger magnified beyond reason and the blood of innocents, but Lan Zhan was a shining example of what a cultivator should be.

Yet it might just be enough of a distraction for Wei Wuxian to escape. Long enough to get to the bottom of the cliff, and change his mask and outer robe to pose as a grandfather out foraging for mushrooms.

*Oh, a cultivator threw powder in my face and flew that way,* he'd say, and Lan Zhan would insist on taking the nice grandfather to an inn for some congee. He'd get to stare at Lan Zhan for a while *and* keep his secret — and his life — for another day. And if he lost Jiangzai — well, he hated that sword as much as it hated him. Talismans were more reliable.

But Lan Zhan saw Jiangzai arching towards him, started to spin and bring up Bichen — and froze. Jiangzai aimed for his gut. Wei Wuxian started to lung forward, knowing he would never make it in time. But at the last second, Lan Zhan lurched forward, and Jiangzai passed between Lan Zhan's wind-blown cloak and his back.

His heart stopped.

Had Jiangzai cut him? Missed? His bond with the sword was fraught and unstable, and he could not tell.

As Jiangzai flew back towards Wei Wuxian, it did not spin so he could catch it, despite his attempt to command it, pulling at the fabric of his core. He ducked at the last moment, and it embedded itself to the hilt in a tree trunk behind him. Wei Wuxian left it there.

He couldn't risk accidentally hurting Lan Zhan with his lack of control for another moment.

Wei Wuxian stood there, waiting, presenting his empty hands in surrender.

He'd had reason to offer Lan Zhan his life twice before. Wei Wuxian still believed it would be worth it, but he would prefer if Lan Zhan did not choose now, when he was finally relearning what it felt like to *live*, to take him up on his offer.

Lan Zhan tilted his head, confusion written in the thinning of his lips. Rather than start forward, he swung Bichen clumsily, a bolt of spiritual energy missing Wei Wuxian by yards.

His stomach dropped in horror. His feet started forward without waiting for input.

Lan Zhan swayed. And, ever graceful, collapsed.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian tore off his mask as he jumped towards him, catching Lan Zhan just before his head would have hit the ground.

Moments before his eyes slid closed, Lan Zhan's eyes met his. *Wei Ying*, he mouthed, and went limp.

"Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, no no no," Wei Wuxian chanted in a terrified whisper, turning Lan Zhan over onto his stomach, and pulling his cloak aside. Frantic, he pawed at the slice Jiangzai had made in Lan Zhan's robes, but it was impossible to see through the thin hole.

Dimly, he heard Wen Qing's voice informing him that blood from even a minor injury would be visible on the tattered edges of white robes. But he needed to be sure.

Pulling Yuanzheng from his sleeve, he pulled Lan Zhan's robes away from his skin, and made a perpendicular cut. He pulled back the flaps and found — scars. No blood, no new cut, but scars.

Dozens of them, raised and wicked. Most had turned to white, but a few spots remained stubbornly red. Whip scars. He recognized them even without the branching patterns that spread from Zidian's marks. This was a punishment — the worst kind a Lan could suffer and remain within the clan.

It would be an impossibility for Lan Zhan to have done anything to deserve this. Above all, Lan Zhan was *good*.

Wei Wuxian had always been the only thing that made him step a single to out of line.

And he remembered —

Lan Zhan turning on the other cultivators gathered at Nightless City to protect him.

Lan Zhan, desperate as he attempted to make himself into a single thread binding Wei Wuxian to life on that cliff.

Wei Wuxian could think of no reason Lan Zhan would have been punished, other than for him.

He couldn't stop himself from reaching out to touch, tracing the lines as tears began to slip, unbidden, down his cheeks.

But if there was no wound —

Wei Wuxian remembered, suddenly, that he now had spiritual energy to share. He pulled a thread from the center of his core, where no resentful energy lay stagnant, and directed it through his palm, flat against Lan Zhan's back. Most, he sent to Lan Zhan's core, but he branched off a bit to investigate Lan Zhan's scars.

What he found there was far more spiritual energy than should be collected in the meridians of the back, the flow of the channels between them slow and strange. Heart pounding, he directed his search towards Lan Zhan's core, and found it missing much of the spiritual energy that should have been there.

There was no question what had happened: Lan Zhan diverted his own spiritual energy to deal with the effects of his scars, and overextended his core. And so, he fainted.

Wei Wuxian wondered if this was a frequent occurrence.

Rather than pour more energy into Lan Zhan's core, he pushed a little at the flow in his back, as Wen Qing had done so many times for him, and withdrew. He turned Lan Zhan back over on his lap, and waited for him to stir.

He was not certain how much time passed before Lan Zhan began to stir, for Wei Wuxian could have stared at him for an eternity and never felt time moving on. But finally, Lan Zhan pursed his lips, and scrunched his eyes, and woke.

His eyes met Wei Wuxian's, and his mouth fell open, temptingly pink. Lan Zhan's eyes roved over his features until Wei Wuxian felt much like an Oasis in a desert.

An eternity later, Lan Zhan moved. His hand trembled as he reached up to cup Wei Wuxian's cheek.

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan said, his voice so tenuous Wei Wuxian feared he might shatter under his hands.

Lan Zhan pulled gently on the back of his neck, guiding Wei Wuxian's mouth to his. Wei Wuxian sighed against his parted lips, his eyes fluttering closed.

Here, at least, he could follow where Lan Zhan led.

## Chapter End Notes

Surprise?

I recently got a [twitter](#) with the intent of doing some threadfics, but I'm a social media grandmother. So, hi! If you want to come talk to me about anything cql related :)

[Chapter promo tweet](#)

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji thinks he's dreaming, Wei Wuxian gets to bully Lan Wangji into taking care of himself for a change, and Jiang Yanli salvages a loss

## Chapter Notes

There are some random sect leaders here! They have no purpose beyond gossip and filling out the numbers :)

CW: Lwj's chronic pain and past corporal punishment, canon typical discrimination against sex workers/classism and kink shaming (non POV)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Collapsing at Xue Yang's feet was a perilous error, one Lan Wangji did not expect to survive. He only regretted leaving A-Yuan, and that he did not succeed in bringing Xue Yang with him.

It was not a surprise to open his eyes and find a soft-edged Wei Ying crowned in starlight, staring down at him with parted lips. He had dreamt of much the same many times before.

Dreaming or dead, Wei Ying's was the first face he would wish to see. He treasured every moment his subconscious conjured of Wei Ying laughing and teasing, or focused and intent. These scant, hazy moments made their inevitable end worth bearing, when dappled sunlight twisted to volcanic sunrise and nights in the rain and his own blood spattered on stone at his uncle's command.

Though he knew it would turn a dream to his darkest memories, Lan Wangji could not help but reach up to touch his cheek. To his surprise, he found he could. That had never happened before, not since before —

Before, when his nightmares were anxious and imagined, or filled with battlefields past. When he was more likely to dream of Wei Ying's weight in his arms, of hands gliding gently on skin, mouths exploring, bodies moving to the rhythm that lived within him than of Wei Ying's latest rejection.

He wasted no time, drawing Wei Ying down to him, for he could not rise to meet him.

Wei Ying did not turn to ripples and vanish at the touch of his lips.

He gasped, and Wei Ying pulled away. Worry creased his forehead, but still, he stayed solid. He caught Lan Wangji's hand, and held it to his chest. Wei Ying's other arm was wrapped around him, holding him in his lap.

Wei Ying's heart hammered against his hand, and the axis of Lan Wangji's world spun like a top.

"You're real." He breathed. "Wei *Ying*."

"Lan Zhan." Wei Ying smiled, and it was held the warmth of a hearth fire, insulating him against the bone-deep chill of the wind. "I'm here, I'm alive, I'm okay. You're okay."

Impossible, said his mind.

Yes, said his heart.

"Wei Ying. How?"

Grimacing, Wei Ying looked away for the first time. "It's a really long story."

Lan Wangji did not think he would be moving on his own for some time, and Wei Ying — however he was here, however he had saved Lan Wangji before Xue Yang could take advantage of his weakness, *if* this wasn't Wei Ying easing his way into the afterlife and reincarnation together — had not used his sword in years.

"I have time." He said.

"Do you like lying on the freezing ground? I don't remember anything in the Lan principles to support that. We can have this conversation with you in a nice, soft bed with tea and soup in your belly."

Wei Ying pouted, though his tone brooked no argument. As though Lan Wangji would ever object to the offer of Wei Ying, and a bed. Would Wei Ying sit on it next to him, holding his hand while they talked?

He didn't dare hope for anything more. Wei Ying here, with him, was already a greater than he could ever earn if he cultivated to immortality and spent eternity slaying demons without rest.

"Lan Zhan? Lan Zhan, why are you crying?"

"I'm crying?" His voice came out choked, and he realized he must be, though he could not feel his cheeks. He did not understand why he was crying, when he felt like a sun had grown in his heart in the space of an instant, but he could not seem to stop.

Wei Ying used his own black and gray sleeve to wipe away Lan Wangji's tears.

He remained uncertain this was not simply a very good dream. Only the persistent ache in his spine, the tearing pain in his shoulder blade, the pinching stiffness in his neck that returned when he shifted slightly into Wei Ying kept him from breaking down entirely.

Wei Ying's hand shook as he lowered it to hold him closer. Breath hitching as he held back sobs, Lan Wangji turned into the cool fabric of Wei Ying's robes, dampening his sleeves as he slowly regained control of himself.

It was then Lan Wangji realized Wei Ying's whole body was shaking, for he wore no cloak around his shoulders. "Wei Ying, you're shivering."

"I kind of threw my cloak in your face." He laughed, with a sheepish, lopsided grin. "Don't worry, I have another, for when I'm *not* playing Xue Yang. Or maybe I could share yours."

"Yes, please," his heart chimed in before his mind caught up. "For when you're what."

"Uh." Wei Ying stilled. "Can you pretend I didn't just say that?"

Lan Wangji saw no reason to. He had doubted Wei Ying only once, and spent every day since wishing he had reacted differently. "Is this why the so-called Xue Yang has killed only a few cultivators? Jins."

"Uh."

Lan Wangji took that as a yes. He was certain the Jins, like Wen Chao, had given Wei Ying a valid reason for their execution. Not all of those who followed Jin Zixun in hunting down the servants and townsfolk of Nightless City had died with him. And that was only one example of the depredations those still among the Jin had committed, protected by the facade of the noble gentry. "Then you may take me to an inn and explain there. However, I do not believe I can stand on my own at present."

Though he had once walked from Gusu to Qishan on a broken leg, when he had first learned to divert the contents of his core to move through debilitating pain, Lan Wangji was at present so drained he would do himself permanent damage in the attempt. He had already spent far too much time that day using the skill, simply to counteract the flashes of numb fire that shot along his spine with every step. Fighting Wei Ying with Bichen had been a step too far.

"Yeah, I didn't think so." Wei Ying said.

Lan Wangji jolted, bunching Wei Ying's robes together as his hands tightened into fists.

"I should tell you, I checked your back. I thought I might have injured you, but those scars —" Wei Ying seemed to notice all the blood had drained from Lan Wangji's face, and paused. "I'll ask you later then."

"It's not too far to the next village. I should be able to fly us both."

"On Jiangzai?"

“Oh, no. That demonspawn would dump us off a cliff. Though I should get it back from that tree. Ugh.” He frowned, reaching around Lan Wangji to produce a blade in a gleaming silver sheath, patterned in unmistakably and garishly in the Nie boar crest. “Yuanzheng is much nicer.”

He stared for a long moment. “That’s a saber.”

“I don’t have Suibian.” Wei Ying shrugged, as though Lan Wangji had not begged and others had not demanded that he return to the correct path many times over, a hint of discomfort in the set of his jaw.

This was the longest Wei Ying had allowed Lan Wangji this close while he was conscious since his first disappearance. He wondered, as he had many times, if there was something more to Wei Ying’s use of resentful energy that Lan Wangji had failed to consider before it was too late.

Something that had changed with the miracle that brought Wei Ying back to him.

He tried to focus on a thought just beneath the surface, but it slipped away as his energy began to ebb once again.

“This saber is well named. It has been a long journey.” He said, when he realized Wei Ying was waiting for a reply.

Wei Ying smiled sadly, and Lan Wangji knew he had intended another meaning. Though his own journey could now come to an end, for home was anywhere that had Wei Ying, Wei Ying was involved in something he did not yet understand.

How else would he come to wear the face of an enemy?

Wei Ying bent to pick up a piece of wood — no, a carved mask, and slipped it over his face. He braced himself for Xue Yang’s features to replace his beloved’s, but when the shimmering energy of Wei Ying’s talisman sank into the wood, another face looked back.

“You —”

The oddly familiar stranger from the inn, *Wei Ying*, bowed. “Your traveling spicy congee distributor, Nie Xiaomeng at your service.”

“Wei Ying.”

Though it was not his face, the way it fell in dismay was identical. “You hate it.”

It was a brilliant invention, leagues beyond the previous methods used for such disguises as it appeared to require neither murder nor desecrating a body. But yes, Lan Wangji hated it. “You are very clever, but I prefer your own face.”

A strange, high-pitched sound emerged from Wei Ying’s throat. “Lan Zhan, what the fuck. It’s not safe to fly while intoxicated.”



Lan Wangji frowned. “You have not been drinking.”

“You’re intoxicating.” He said, like it was fact and not devastating enough to make Lan Wangji’s heart quicken. “You always have been, but *apparently* you learned to *flirt* while I was dead.”

Dead. So Wei Ying was, truly, a miracle, as he had thought.

“Let’s see if I can fly like you do. Come on, lean back on me.” Ignoring Lan Wangji’s obvious inner turmoil, Wei Ying bent to help him sit on his new saber’s blade, and sat beside him so Lan Wangji could lean against his side as they flew.

Though he wanted to stay awake, afraid Wei Ying would disappear if he closed his eyes for longer than a blink, Lan Wangji dozed. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have immediately meditated upon waking from a fainting spell, returning the flow of his qi to its proper path and his core to full strength. Today, the numbness in his extremities, combined with going into shock, prevented him from focusing.

And *Wei Ying, Wei Ying Wei Ying*, warm against his side, an arm wrapped around his waist, shielding him from the worst of the icy wind, lulled him back under.

He stirred when his arms were pulled around strong shoulders, hands wrapped around his thighs and lifted.

“Hmm?” He mumbled, disgruntled by the disturbance.

“No talking your way out of it this time, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying teased, seemingly unaware that the only words in Lan Wangji’s mind at present were *Wei Ying* and *hands* and *thighs* and *sleepy*. “If you’re worried about your reputation, just pretend you’re still unconscious.”

“I don’t want to.” He said, a little petulantly, nuzzling into Wei Ying’s neck, shifting just enough to tighten his arms around him. Everyone should know he was Wei Ying’s.

“No?” Wei Ying laughed, disbelieving.

That wasn’t allowed. “*Wei Ying*.”

Another laugh, this time fond and indulgent, which was allowed. “Just try not to say my name, okay?”

That seemed important, so he nodded, instead focusing his efforts on attempting to merge their bodies into one.

“What’re you doing carrying Hanguang-jun?” Someone with a grating, high pitched voice demanded. “Doesn’t he hate being touched?”

A cacophony of shouted demands followed.

Jins, Lan Wangji decided. These must be Jins. That sort of behavior would never be permitted in the Cloud Recesses. He did not open his eyes to check, merely nuzzled into the

soft warmth of the gray cloak Wei Ying now wore.

Wei Ying squeaked, before managing to speak over the noisy Jins. “Xue Yang took advantage of Hanguang-jun’s night hunt injury to escape. Sorry I couldn’t get here ahead of you!”

“*You’re* the cultivator with the congee.” Someone who did not deserve Wei Ying’s congee shouted.

“We thought the other teams made you up.” Another, undeserving of the smallest scrap of Wei Ying’s attention, chimed in.

But Wei Ying laughed. “That’s me, that’s me. Did you manage to get some in time?”

“I read the briefing,” The disciple who had waited for Lan Wangji said. “I was also the only one who didn’t get corpse powder in the face.”

“Good for you!” Wei Ying said, and Lan Wangji was grateful that holding him prevented Wei Ying from patting the suck up on the head. “Hey, weren’t there more of you?”

Lan Wangji mumbled his name into his throat.

“And actually, I’ll ask in the morning!” Then they were moving, and Wei Ying was speaking to someone else, using a too loud voice. “Are there two rooms left? No, only one? I guess I’ll be sleeping on the floor tonight!”

“No.”

“What?”

“No sleeping on the floor.” Wei Ying had kissed him, and he would not be sleeping on the floor. Shufu would sputter and insist that any nephew of his should wait until marriage, but Shufu should spend his time worrying about the nephew having an affair with a married man.

“Shh, you.” Wei Ying hissed, as one of his hands disappeared from Lan Wangji’s thigh, returning almost instantly and pressing a small, metallic object into his skin.

Lan Wangji did as Wei Ying asked until he found himself dropped onto a soft mattress, startling him enough that he finally opened his eyes. He grabbed Wei Ying’s hand, despite the servant dropping off a teapot and a covered tureen.

“Sleep with me,” he demanded as soon as the door shut behind the servant.

Wei Ying choked, turning bright red, taking a long moment before replying. “I had to tell them that. If you want, I’ll sleep here with you. Let’s get you some tea.”

That seemed very reasonable, so when Wei Ying held the cup to his lips, Lan Wangji drank dutifully.

After a few cups, his awareness began to return. He flexed his fingers, burning as the last of the feeling returned to them. He hadn’t even noticed they were numb.

Lan Wangji had not overextended himself this badly since he was in seclusion, determinedly pushing past his limits in an attempt to find equilibrium in his changed body. “I should meditate.”

“Ah. Yes, I’ll —” Wei Ying looked around for something to do.

“Hold me? Please?” Lan Wangji could not look at him as he made the request.

Without another word, Wei Ying climbed into bed with him. He sat with his back against the headboard, so Lan Wangji could lean against him, close enough to a proper meditation pose for his purposes.

Sinking into himself, Lan Wangji coaxed the spiritual energy spread through his back to resume its circulation through his meridians, ultimately return his core to its proper size. A testament to how badly he had overextended himself, some of the energy required prodding to detach from its temporary use, a sign he had come dangerously close to a qi deviation.

When he opened his eyes and saw Wei Ying, smiling softly just for him, Lan Wangji could not bring himself to care. “You really are here.”

“Ah, Lan Zhan. I’m so sorry I kept you waiting.” Wei Ying pushed a stray piece of hair behind Lan Wangji’s ear, and both ears heated in response. He realized a moment later the weight of his Guan was missing, and Wei Ying had spent the length of his meditation finger-combing his hair.

He blushed more furiously. “It was not your fault.”

“It sort of was, but — let’s not argue about that.” Wei Ying shifted out from under him, ignoring Lan Wangji’s noise of protest, and brought back a bowl of broth. Pressing it into Lan Wangji’s hands, he perched on the edge of the bed. “You had questions?”

Lan Wangji drained the bowl quickly, and set it aside, out of Wei Ying’s reach so he would not interrupt himself to refill it.

“I do not know where to start.” He had not known, believed, or even hoped for Wei Ying’s return. If he had, he would have put together a list.

“Hmm, well. The real Xue Yang is dead.” Wei Ying tapped his chin, deciding where to begin. “You see, I had this array, and someone convinced him to use it to bring me back. It worked, but it killed him.”

“Good.” He nodded.

That startled a laugh out of Wei Ying. “I like to think so too.”

Wei Ying explained the terms of his resurrection without ever revealing who brought it about. Nie Huaisang was involved, somehow, he surmised from the saber. But Lan Wangji doubted he had the answers.

It did not escape Lan Wangji's notice that Wei Ying also did not reveal the identities of those whose lives he was bound to take revenge before he wrapped up his tale.

"You've been using disorienting powder." That made sense. It would be dangerous to use on an ordinary person, especially in winter. Even the worst cultivator could manage two days of inedia before they sobered up without the assistance of spicy congee, and retain just enough awareness to avoid walking off a cliff.

"Aha, yeah. I don't want to go around murdering people." Wei Ying's mouth twisted in distaste. "I don't get off on this. I'm not actually Xue Yang."

Lan Wangji wanted to shake the self-doubt out of him. "You have a reason."

"I can't tell you more—" Wei Ying was too earnest, too worried, and Lan Wangji needed him to understand.

"I trust you, Wei Ying. You do not have to tell me." He would like to know, but he would trust Wei Ying either way.

"Oh." There was wonder in Wei Ying's eyes now as he looked at Lan Wangji.

He forced himself to continue. "I did not — make that clear before. I refuse to make the same mistake again."

"Oh, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying leaned in, and kissed him, slipping his tongue between his lips.

Lan Wangji's hands came up to Wei Ying's shoulders and flexed, helplessly, unsure what to do with them, unsure how to move his lips in a way that would please Wei Ying. Hesitant at first, he let Wei Ying explore his mouth, melting under his touch, a hand gripping his waist, the other stroking his neck, utterly unaware of any sounds he was making. Wei Ying held his lips firm and tight, and so Lan Wangji mimicked him, and when Wei Ying hummed against his lips, Lan Wangji dared to dart his tongue into Wei Ying's mouth.

Wei Ying made a clicking sound and pulled back for a moment, but Lan Wangji was nothing if not a fast learner. When Wei Ying dove back in, Lan Wangji did not repeat his mistakes, finally earning a moan just before they separated.

"There are things I can't tell you right now. But this might help." Wei Ying pulled back his right sleeve, showing the four remaining open wounds.

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan reached out, and stopped just before touching.

"You can touch," He bit his lip, stopping abruptly.

Lan Wangji wanted to know the end of that sentence, but he needed to accept Wei Ying's show of trust.

Slowly, Lan Zhan reached out to trail his fingers gently over the skin bordering the wounds.

“There were eight, now there are four. I was offered a second chance — third chance, really, at life. But I promise. All of them have done something to deserve it.” Wei Ying explained, though he had not requested more details.

And Lan Zhan said again, “I trust you. I believe you.”

“You love me.” Wei Ying was inexplicably awed by a fact as obvious as the sun rising in the morning.

“You love me.” Lan Wangji said as counterargument. Because he was certain now. “Will you let me help you?”

“You already are. I’ll tell you more when I can.” Wei Ying brushed his thumb over Lan Wangji’s lips, making him shiver.

A very effective distraction. “Will you kiss me more?”

“I’ll kiss you as much as you want.” Wei Ying promised.

There was no limit to what he wanted, so they kissed until he fell asleep.

When Lan Wangji woke, the bed was empty. Terror ran through his veins.

“Wei Ying!” He began to sit up, but a stab of pain and momentary numbness forced him to collapse.

Wei Ying was merely by the window, he realized belatedly, fiddling contemplatively with a stone.

“Lan Zhan!” He cried, rushing to him. “Let me help.” Wei Ying helped him into a seated position and heaved a pile of extra bedding behind him, so he could recline without lying flat on his back.

“I know I have said this several times already, but you really are here.” He caught Wei Ying’s hand in his, swinging their bound hands between. “It is difficult for me to believe.”

“Oh, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying bent down and pecked him on the lips, pulling back far too soon. “We need to eat. You, especially.”

Wei Ying grabbed a tray from the nearby table and balanced it on Lan Wangji’s lap. He stared down at it,

“Do you need me to feed you, Zhanzhan?” Wei Ying teased.

Ears burning, Lan Wangji plucked a small bao off the plate with his chopsticks, and shoved it into Wei Ying’s mouth. He coughed around it, chewing and swallowing before he nudged Lan Wangji’s shoulder and laughed. “Ah, there’s my Lan Zhan. Next you’ll be calling me ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous,” He said fondly, to hear Wei Ying laugh again, and accepted exactly one spoonful of congee from Wei Ying before prying the spoon away.

How had Wei Ying managed to procure the sweet, red bean congee specific to Caiyi Town here in Qinghe? When had Wei Ying even noticed his slightly illicit fondness for sweet things?

The bao, too were filled with a savory mushroom-vegetable mix, though Lan Wangji often had difficulty convincing cooks outside of Gusu that ground meat *did* count as meat, and he was certain he would not eat it.

Wei Ying must have looked over the cook’s shoulder the whole time, perhaps even started the congee himself after Lan Wangji fell asleep last time.

He was going to melt into the bed, and that was without the way Wei Ying was staring at him as he slowly, and absentmindedly ate more of the bao.

“So,” Wei Ying said when they were finished eating. “Your back. I need you to tell me exactly where and how it hurts. Is it burning, stabbing, pulling pain? What triggers it?”

He blinked. “What for?”

“There might be a way to reduce some of your scarring and repair some of the other damage you’ve done to the muscles and joints around it.” Wei Ying said, because he cared, and he did not understand.

“This was a punishment, Wei Ying. I agreed not to seek treatment in exchange for another concession.”

“What could possibly be worth that?” Wei Ying jumped to his feet, raising his voice.

“Our son!” The words were ripped from Lan Wangji’s throat, and he realized then what he had failed to say. More softly, he continued, “A-Yuan. A-Yuan is alive. I was permitted to raise him.”

Wei Ying did not brighten as he’d expected, the heartbreak in his expression only deepening.

“You are not surprised.”

“Shi- someone figured it out. They only told me, I swear.” Wei Ying reached for his hands, interlacing their fingers. “I’m so glad you had each other. But Lan Zhan, it’s been long enough.”

Lan Wangji could not meet his eyes. “I agreed. I cannot break my word.”

“Well, I didn’t agree to it, and you’re *my* zhiji.” Wei Ying said petulantly.

Against his will, the corner of his mouth ticked up. “The Cloud Recesses do not recognize zhiji as a valid relationship to contest the elders’ rulings.”

Wei Ying groaned, squeezing Lan Wangji's hands hard enough to hurt. "Fuck the elders! You're in pain, Lan Zhan! Please don't ask me to watch this when there's something I can do."

"Wei Ying..."

"I know. I'm not alone this time, I swear." He still would not say who he was working with, instead changing tactics. "You'd be setting a good example for me."

Lan Wangji had known he would give in from the moment Wei Ying expressed his own distress. But that made a good excuse. Wei Ying would learn how deeply Lan Wangji yearned to fulfill his every desire, when he told the whole truth.

Though he was not entirely certain Wei Ying did not already know. His smile was entirely too smug as he balanced ink and a notebook on the bed to record Lan Wangji's symptoms.

Jiang Yanli bit her tongue and stood placidly at Jin Guangyao's side as he stole months of work out from under her nose. It was not particularly difficult to keep a straight face. She had learned to fake a smile before she memorized two hundred characters.

Being Yu Ziyuan's daughter had made it a necessity when Jiang Yanli would rather have snuck into the kitchens than sit through another futile cultivation lesson.

It was a skill that had always served her well with her in laws and continued to know, though she often felt like an entirely different person.

"We," Jin Guangyao said, to the client sect leaders who came to bring the year's tribute for his inspection, after the courtesies were complete and twelve guests knelt behind tables in a more intimate reception hall. "We recently opened an orphanage, where children will be taught trades. We've brought in thirty children off the streets so far and found one who has strong potential to form a golden core. She will be joining our young disciples here as soon as she learns basic etiquette and characters."

"We," he said, but no one was under the impression he meant anything but "I".

Qin Su seethed enough for the both of them.

Jiang Yanli nodded along, and served tea, though she couldn't make herself more than pick at the food.

*At least my sister isn't going to notice anything.* Qin Su said. *Because you're being obvious.*

Qin Su's father really must not be doing well, if Qin Xifeng had come to give tribute on his behalf. But Qin Su refused to acknowledge that thought.

Sect Leader Zhai, however, stared at her over their teacup with narrowed eyes.

Still, when the meal ended and the evening turned to mingling over drinks, Jiang Yanli chose to join Sect Leader Zhai's group, which included the sect leaders of their immediate northern and southern neighbors, and Qi Juan's father.

"This orphanage project." They said. "Do tell me all about it."

Bile rose in her throat, but she shoved it back down. Pasting her smile back on, she described the details of the project. Two of the three sect leaders she had not yet interacted with — Sect Leaders Diao and Shen — listened with polite interest, while the third was more interested in consuming the evening's entire supply of wine.

When she finished her account, it was a surprise when Qi Juan's father was the one to comment first. "Please send along reports to Chenggu over the next year. This could be very useful in our region. We're still settling upheaval from what Wen Ruohan did to his own people."

He remained *very* displeased over his daughter's removal to Lanling, but it seemed his displeasure was focused on her unworthy husband — currently gossiping in a corner with Sect Leaders Yao and Sima — and Jin Guangyao — speaking with the leaders of Lanling Jin's closest client sects. The ones that bordered them, and therefore had less reason to resent interference from afar.

Madame Jin, on the other hand, had brought his daughter home for a long visit.

The other sect leaders chimed in to agree, even the wine-absorbed Sect Leader Gao, not wanting to appear like he hadn't been paying attention.

"I'll be certain to." Jiang Yanli fought against Qin Su's sudden burst of hope to give a courteous nod.

*I wasn't that expressive when I was alive. I was good at this too.* Qin Su said. *I just don't have to hide what I'm feeling anymore.*

*You didn't have to deal with a second set of emotions inside your head.* Jiang Yanli replied, with a certain wryness now that the evening wasn't a complete loss. *It amplifies things.*

Whether out of hatred based on his birth or transferred from his father, there were still those who preferred Qin Su to Jin Guangyao, on the simple basis of being anyone else.

When the others turned to a debate on the quality of wines around the cultivation world, Zhai Qiaolian turned shrewd eyes on her. "You're looking a bit pale."

Qin Su's gulp made Jiang Yanli's mind do a disorienting flip.

Fortunately, Sect Leader Yao's inability to whisper for more than five minutes worked in her favor. "We all know Xiandu needs to be in charge of everything. Even in bed, it seems."

"We do?" Sect Leader Bei was far from the brightest sect leader around. His grant of the region surrounding Nightless City was almost entirely due to the number of pretty servants he'd gifted Jin Guangshan, and everyone knew it.



“Didn’t you hear what he did with Xue Yang?” Sect Leader Yao’s volume increased again.

“More like *to*.” Sect Leader Miao snickered.

“Do you think he does that sort of thing to his wife? The — *ropes*?” Sect Leader Yao sounded scandalized.

She didn’t know where the rumor had come from, but she suspected the answer was Nie Huaisang, possibly through A-Xian.

But then, even when Jiang Yanli had been herself, everyone knew Sect Leader Yao had never pleased a lover in his life. Naturally he wouldn’t understand the pleasures of restraining a lover and watching them fall apart under his hands.

Zixuan had always looked so beautiful, flushed and panting as he arched into his bonds.

*We’ve talked about saving those thoughts for when I’m out.* Qin Su grumbled.

“We all knew the whoreson learned tricks in that brothel. This just shows what kind.” Sect Leader Miao said.

“Poor Jin-furen.” Sect Leader Yao sighed.

There was that feeling of bubbles in her mind, though Qin Su’s laughter had been a scarce thing recently.

It was not only Jiang Yanli who had overheard. Everyone in the room was now focused on Sect Leader Yao.

“Could you repeat that, please?” Jin Guangyao’s left dimple twitched.

“Xiandu.” The sect leaders bowed hastily.

“The rumor if you please. What’s being spread about me this time?” He tapped his foot, three time, then again.

“Uh. Nothing?” Sect Leader Bei squeaked unconvincingly.

“Are you lying to me?” Jin Guangyao nearly snapped, whirling on another target. “Yao-zongzhu, did you truly not produce enough to make your quota?”

Paling, Sect Leader Yao crumbled easily. “There’s a rumor that you tied up Xue Yang and — and slept with him!”

“That I — “ Jin Guangyao shouted. And cut himself off, looking shocked, even as a vein pulsed in his forehead. A pin dropping would have echoed in the silence that stretched on interminably.

Finally, Jin Guangyao continued. “Please continue availing yourselves of the wine. I’m afraid I must retire for the evening.”

The door slammed shut behind him.

Jiang Yanli turned back to her potential allies. “Pale, you said?”

Zhai Qiaolian gave her an assessing look. “It must have been a trick of the light.”

Jin Guangyao disappeared off to Gusu with far less warning than usual. Though he did not say so, his slightly frantic air made it clear he was rushing off to ensure his lover did not believe the rumors.

Jiang Yanli had lost one battle, yet she was immensely satisfied, nevertheless.

## Chapter End Notes

Lwj had so many feelings I had to move a scene to the next chapter. Team bonding and actual plot developments NEXT time

If JGY losing his composure for a second seemed odd, he thinks so too :)

[Promo Tweet](#) if you'd like

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

Wei Wuxian realizes his Shijie has better taste in women than men, Jin Guangyao is not having a good time right now, and Lan Wangji has his priorities straight (his priorities are: 1. kissing Wei Ying)

## Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for 500 kudos!!!! 🎉🎉💜

I have an estimated chapter count now! I think 👉 we're at least halfway through

**CW:** Needles, references to past trauma around wwx's death, a short xiyao scene containing an insult jgy's received about his mother's job, animal guts (description not detailed)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Nie Huaisang arrived only hour after Jin Guangyao left.

“San-geeeeeee!” Nie Huaisang collapsed in a heap at the top of the Koi Tower stairs, continuing to wail. A passing disciples looked at him and collectively sighed. One branched off to find Madame Jin, while the others undertook the monumental task of coaxing Sect Leader Nie into the meeting room with the calming fountain that had been added for his unannounced visits. The two disciples who accompanied him were no help at all, concealing laughter as they followed along.

Jiang Yanli was informed of all this by the dogpile of panting disciples outside the door. She told them to take the afternoon off, and waited for the group to vanish from sight before sliding the door open. “Jin Guangyao just left for Gusu.”

Nie Huaisang raised his head, half his hair draped over his face. He pushed it back and sat up on his heels. “Oh. Perfect. Shall we have tea?”

She hesitated. “I was hoping to...”

In Jin Guangyao’s absence, Wen Qing would be able to talk for hours without worrying someone might intrude after A-Xian checked in. She wanted to tell her all that had happened, hear her laughter rising uninhibited by fear. Wen Qing might fall asleep to the sound of her

voice, rather than the other way around, and Jiang Yanli could drift off with her breathing echoing around her.

Jiang Yanli still hadn't grown used to sleeping alone. Wen Qing made her feel like there was someone with her, if not nearby. But she knew it was far more difficult for Wen Qing to relax enough to rest in more than fitful, stolen snatches.

"Oh, I *see*." Nie Huaisang resembled a bird about to steal a bobble for its nest, though what he thought he saw was a mystery to Jiang Yanli.

*Is it really?* Qin Su asked. *Think about it. Just a little.*

*I really don't —*

*Now you sound like him.* Qin Su sighed, and Jiang Yanli decided she'd rather let her have her fun than be subjected to more unfavorable comparisons.

"Perhaps save it for another time." Nie Huaisang continued. "We have things to discuss, and I'm not your only visitor tonight."

He produced a stick from his sleeve that might have been picked up on any path, and threw it at the door.

A tall young man with a too-symmetrical face peaked into the room.

Jiang Yanli remembered not to speak aloud at the last second in case anyone was listening, and instead mouthed, "A-Xian?"

He grinned, giving her the three fingered salute of a promise.

"Isn't this better than your plans?" Nie Huaisang donned a mask of his own, transforming him into a gap-toothed teenage boy in sect leader's clothing. "Why don't my fourth disciple and this little junior accompany you to discuss matters, while Nie-zongzhu gets spectacularly drunk and makes a fool of himself."

He blinked at her, clearly waiting to her to question how he could be in two places at once. "I'm not going to ask."

Both boys pouted. It seemed they brought out the parts of each other that remembered what it was to be young and carefree.

A-Xian pulled a second disciple into view, who held another mask in his hands. She assumed it would give him the appearance of Nie Huaisang, which explained why he did not seem to have brought along any of his more musclebound disciples.

Qin Su sent her a visual of slumping onto a desk.

"I see you've planned this thoroughly." She said, and addressed the disciple. "If you must cause property damage, please choose the south gardens, I'd like to have them redone in the spring."

Her A-Xuan's lotus pond was long gone, but a new one would make a fitting memorial.

He bowed very seriously.

Once the disciple had run off with a bottle of wine, making an admirable imitation of Nie Huaisang's dead-waking sobs, A-Xian scooped her up, and jumped onto the rooftop.

She shoved lightly against his chest. "Put me down, I can do that now!"

"Oh. Right." A-Xian laughed sheepishly, yet still set her on her feet with the utmost delicacy.

"I can't!" Nie Huaisang called up.

A-Xian dropped to his stomach with a sigh and helped him up. Nie Huaisang grumbled in lower than his usual tones, his dislike of any exercise that risked breaking a sweat or dirtying robes the truest part of his public persona. Once he'd managed to scramble onto the roof, he began dusting off his robes inch by inch. A-Xian rolled his eyes and led the way across the rooftops, looking back only once to make sure they were following him.

By the time they reached the kitchens, Jiang Yanli had realized where they were taking her. A-Xian paused where the roof suddenly cut off, and subverted the talisman, using a more streamlined method than the one Nie Huaisang had managed, but Jiang Yanli could not follow the rapid gestures of his hands to learn it.

Warmth and apprehension gathered in her chest. She hoped they had thought this through.

But A-Xian and Wen Qing together in one place — far and beyond an improvement on her hopes for the evening.

Only once they were safely inside Wen Qing's room did A-Xian drop his mask haphazardly on the ground, and envelop her in his arms.

Wei Wuxian sprawled on his stomach, forcing himself to lie still though the needles Wen Qing jabbed into his back worsened his ever present need to fidget. They weren't particularly painful, when the top of his pain scale would forever be occupied by two days in anesthetized surgery promptly followed by a fall he had not entirely survived and intimate acquaintance with hundreds of ravening ghosts.

It wasn't really difficult to ignore it to talk about the man Wei Wuxian had left pouting with kiss-swollen lips, and who might be able to give him a run for his money if a contest for most self-sacrificing.

But it tickled.

Wei Wuxian recounted his reunion with Lan Zhan — replacing how his lips still tingled at the memory of kissing him with a wistful sigh — to much teasing. But both Shijie and Wen Qing sobered when he began to tell them of Lan Zhan's scars.

Nie Huaisang was gracious enough to give him the illusion of privacy. In her paperman form, Qin Su sat on the table near him, as he held open a book outside Wei Wuxian's field of view for her to see. From the number of times words like shading and linework popped up, they were having a spirited debate over art.

"He wouldn't tell me how it happened, but — they're whip scars." Only the feeling of his golden core eating up bits of that stagnant resentful energy pooled beneath it grounded him enough not to undo all of Wen Qing's hard work.

"Oh, A-Xian it's not your fault." Shijie sat with her cheek resting on her knees, watching Wen Qing work. He doubted he would ever get used to her new face, but her soft expression for watching family was the same.

No, not family — or not quite, in Wen Qing's case. Shijie had always been quiet in her longing, her gaze easily mistaken for staring off into the distance by anyone who did not know her well. But Wei Wuxian knew the frequency of her sighs from the months of lessons spent mooning over a peacock who did not deserve her, at least not then.

It was far more difficult to think negatively of Jin Zixuan now, after he had died trying to make her happy. He still did not deserve Shijie, of course. But the man had done his best. There were very few people who could meet the standards for Shijie's Wei Wuxian had come up with Jiang Cheng when they were young.

Wen Qing, however, was one of them.

"He made his own decisions, just like I did." Wen Qing said tersely.

"Which of us is letting you stab them repeatedly as a medical treatment and which is refusing to let me take a look at the unknown demonic array inked into her skin?" Though Wei Wuxian still hated the choice she'd made, woke up in a cold sweat from nightmares of being pinned to the ground and forced to watch as everyone he loved was tortured or killed, depending on how creative his subconscious was that night, Wen Qing had few options when she set out for Koi Tower.

Refusing to let him help her in turn *now* was ridiculous, and he had no shame in tattling on her to Shijie.

Who gasped, reaching out to grab Wen Qing's wrist as she reached to remove a needle to end the treatment. "Still? A-Qing, you promised."

Wei Wuxian had the pleasure of seeing Wen Qing's face go red as she turned away so Shijie could not see.

He had assumed Shijie's affections were returned — how could they not be? — but he appreciated the confirmation.

"Can you give me something to help him, since I can't bring him here?" "My notes are in the qiankun bag on the table — the blue one Lan Zhan gave, you don't want to know what's in the one Huaisang brought."

The contents were from a butcher's shop, and several days old already.

A professional before anything else, Wen Qing did not leave him to stew with the needles in his back longer than necessary, removing them before turning her attention to his notes.

Stretching, Wei Wuxian sat up and reached for the wine on the table, ignoring Wen Qing's glare. Benefits of a golden core — he could drink after acupuncture without reversing the effects. He poured cups for her and Shijie, and even used one himself to be polite. Nie Huaisang could continue to pour his own — he hadn't waited for Wen Qing to finish poking holes in Wei Wuxian, and was already a full jar ahead.

"I haven't really tested this body's alcohol tolerance." Shijie picked up her cup, and peered into it mistrustfully.

*<Don't drink more than three jars if you want to walk back.>* Qin Su commented offhand, before returning to her debate with Nie Huaisang. *<No, I think that's a toad, it doesn't have tusks.>*

"Toad motifs," Nie Huaisang shook his head. "That's what happens when you let children doodle on your art."

Wei Wuxian had a sneaking suspicion they were discussing *his* sketches, doodled in his notebooks when he was trying to work through a problem, or got lost in his memories. Or was simply feeling a little horny.

He should probably be irritated they hadn't asked, but eh. If they got through the parts he'd let A-Yuan doodle on, for lack of spare paper, and were off-put by the several dozen sketches of Lan Zhan with parted lips, that was their own fault.

*<You painted shrimp on your fan.>* Qin Su said flatly.

"But you could tell they were shrimp." Nie Huaisang flicked open the fan in question, and fluttered it with pride. Despite the weather, with freezing temperatures leading to winter thunderstorms and hail a further inland, including in Qinghe, Nie Huaisang had brought his usual accessory along.

He needed it 'to be sufficiently dramatic, Wei-xiong, keep up.'

"So about the same as usual then." Shijie perked up, pleased. Tolerance for alcohol and spice were a point of pride in the Jiang Sect, and while Shijie had never hoped to cultivate at the level she could now, in Qin Su's body, those she'd had in spades.

"To both of us still being able to drink Jiang Cheng under the table, despite the resurrections." He clinked his cup against hers, and they both drank the contents down in own gulp. Shijie poured the next round as Wen Qing looked up from her notes.

"I could do more in person, but since you won't be sneaking him in here —" She narrowed her eyes pointedly to cut off any protests he might make — "I'll give you a recipe for an

ointment any legitimate doctor can make, and teach you how to massage it in, which should help break up the worst of the damage. Give me your arm.”

He held it out, and she pressed her thumbs into it like she intended to punch through the muscle. He yelped, and tried to jerk away, but she held fast. “That’s the pressure you should use over the scars.” She pressed down again, still firmly but less painfully. “And over the unscarred skin.”

Wen Qing let go, and turned her back to him, guiding him through the techniques he should use on Lan Zhan, albeit on bare skin and lying down. The most critical point, she said, was the shoulder on Lan Zhan’s sword arm, which he seemed determined to aggravate. If Wei Wuxian could persuade him to rest his arm for a few weeks, and do some stretches she sketched out for him, his core should knit the muscles and tendons back together. Dealing with the discipline whip’s direct damage to muscles and nerves and preventing reinjury would be a more long-term prospect.

When Wen Qing pronounced him adequate, Shijie looked up from the bottle of wine she’d been nursing with her most wide-eyed pleading expression. “A-Qing, you’ll let A-Xian look at the array now, won’t you?”

As anyone would do under those circumstances, Wen Qing crumbled. Her mouth dropped open and she floundered against the full force of Shijie, before finally rolling up her sleeve and shoving her arm at him without ever looking away.

With a smirk and a huff of laughter, Wei Wuxian bent to inspect the array. It hurt to look at, but Wei Wuxian made himself for long enough to see a pattern in the scrambled lines. Blinking away the beginnings of a headache, he sketched a talisman over Wen Qing’s arm. The squiggles of black ink attempted to flee up her arm, but were caught and caged by the golden tones of his spiritual energy, and brought into line.

Wei Wuxian took a moment to comprehend what he was looking at, a potent curse layered with failsafes that made it nigh unbreakable. For anyone other than the person who’d invented using resentful energy for purposes other than brute force and puppets, that was.

If Jin Guangyao had set himself to demonic cultivation with intent, he could have done damage on a level even Wei Wuxian couldn’t undo. He’d twisted Wei Wuxian’s theories into practice in ways that had never occurred to him, and guessed at methods he had never written down, likely due to his firsthand experience with Wen Ruohan’s Yin Iron-driven demonic cultivation.

But Jin Guangyao had still built on Wei Wuxian’s foundations.

Looking up, he announced, “I *could* remove it right now if I could use resentful energy.”

He received a chorus of *nos* in response, as expected. Wen Qing would murder him on the spot if he went and qi deviated for anything short of a true emergency.

“Right. Without it, I’ll need to pick apart the characters that went into the array and write a score to counteract it.” So much more work than necessary. “But I can tell you now that it’ll



need to be played on both ends of the array at the same time.”

Wen Qing could manage one end, if he brought her an instrument, though of course it would be easier if he could tell Lan Zhan. The real problem was finding Wen Ning.

Which would also be easier with demonic cultivation.

“I could have told you it was pointless without finding my brother.” There was nothing in Wen Qing to show disappointment, as though this was all she’d expected. But then, she knew everything he’d written about demonic cultivation now.

Shijie’s expression crumpled, however, and at *that* Wen Qing tensed in his grip.

Nie Huaisang sighed. “My sources can’t seem to pin down a likely location. They’ve identified the woman upstairs, sight unseen. She worked at the same brothel as Jin Guangyao’s mother, which is probably why she’s the only witness of his father’s murder he let live. But Mo Xuanyu keeps disappearing in different locations, and Jin Guangyao hasn’t been spotted sneaking around. Which is strange in itself.”

*<I can find him.>* Qin Su piped up. *<I can snoop around as a bird without attracting attention much more easily than any of you.>*

“You’ll be careful?” Shijie asked.

Wen Qing raised a brow. “Won’t he notice a bird following him around in winter?”

*<What’s he going to do, kill me? I’m already dead.>* Qin Su’s paperman gave an exaggerated shrug. *<There are more birds than you would think that have come down from the mountains or the steppes. I won’t use the same one every time. I might know more about birds than Huaisang now.>*

Wei Wuxian exchanged a glance with Wen Qing. They weren’t entirely sure *dead* was the right word for what Qin Su was.

“I’m useless now, I see.” Nie Huaisang wrapped an ornament hanging from his belt around his finger, and twirled it until it unwound.

*<You’re dramatic.>* Qin Su informed him.

“I wasn’t complaining.” Huaisang snapped his ornament at her form, its string reaching the farthest point of its arc just before reaching her.

Shijie cleared her throat, but her voice still emerged infused with suppressed laughter.

“Actually, if you could turn a few of your spies towards finding Luo Qingyang, I may have a way to disrupt one of Jin Guangyao’s alliances.”

“Who?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Mianmian,” Four voices responded with identical, put-upon sighs.

“Oh.” It wasn’t like anyone had told him Mianmian’s real name. His memory for names and faces of passing acquaintances wasn’t what anyone would call good, but Mianmian had made an impression. He would have at least recognized her name.

“The Qin? Intriguing.” Nie Huaisang said as though Wei Wuxian had never spoken. “If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“If you hear something.” Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “You definitely don’t have eyes in every tree between here and Meishan.”

“Wei-xiong, Wei-xiong, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Huaisang flicked the ornament in his direction that time, and Wei Wuxian determinedly did not flinch. “I do have a question, though. Why are you so embarrassing?”

“What?”

“Did you have to draw *me* looking at Hanguang-jun like that?” He picked up a journal in his lap, and turned it to face the crowd. Huaisang and Qin Su *had* been looking through his work, and it seemed Huaisang had managed to find what was probably the only sketch of him in the lot.

“You did look at Lan Zhan like that. When you crashed our very important and dangerous quest.” He remembered the expression on Huaisang’s face because it was so close to what Wei Wuxian had felt, watching the flowers fall around Lan Zhan. Though with a little more aesthetic appreciation, and a little less desire to drag Lan Zhan somewhere private to confess his love and peel him out of those blue robes that showed off his waist to devastating effect.

“Yes, well, he’s the ideal of a refined gentleman and it wasn’t like you were going to get over yourself and kiss him anyway.” Huaisang threw the journal at him.

Wei Wuxian caught it, and stuck out his tongue.

“It did take you nearly a decade,” Wen Qing pointed out, far too smug for a woman who was ogling Wei Wuxian’s sister and letting her refill her wine more times than she could handle.

“But I *did* kiss him.” After Lan Zhan kissed him first, but he had kissed him. He could still scarcely believe it.

“*I’m* proud of you, Xianxian.” Shijie patted him on the head. And, as always, he couldn’t help but preen.

It wasn’t long before Huaisang took himself out the window to relieve his disciple of distraction duty, and Wen Qing slumped onto Shijie’s shoulder, nuzzling into her.

Wei Wuxian snorted. “I think she’d like to sleep there.”

“I wouldn’t mind. She needs the rest.” Shijie pulled the ribbon Wen Qing used to pull her hair back into a bun free, sending her hair cascading down her back. She ran her fingers through the long tresses, brittle from years of hardship. “I wish I could take her to Lotus Pier.”

“I used to say the same thing about Lan Zhan.”

Shijie startled at the comparison. “Oh, A-Xian. It’s not like that.”

The sadness of her smile spoke volumes. Her heart had moved on faster than her mind.

Wei Wuxian hummed noncommittally, imitating his own lover.

He hadn’t done anything yet with Lan Zhan beyond kissing, but they would. *After* he had ensured Lan Zhan wouldn’t hurt himself worse in the act. Just the thought was enough to send shivers of anticipation racing up his spine.

He departed Koi Tower before dawn, leaving a surprise waiting for Jin Guangyao on his return.

Jin Guangyao lay in his lover’s lap, and attempted to relax into the feeling of Erge’s hands combing through his hair. Xichen’s fingers were nimble, as skilled at playing him as plucking the strings of a guqin. Xichen liked to wake him up that way, after he returned from a few early morning duties, scandalously performed in the absence of the forehead ribbon wrapped around Jin Guangyao’s wrist, with a tray of breakfast for two. Usually, after two days with Xichen his mind would be as quiet as it ever was, as absorbed in his Erge’s tales of the latest adventures of his nephew and cousin’s son as casual thoughts of his plans.

The sanctuary Xichen provided had given rise to many of his best ideas.

That day, however, Jin Guangyao could not stop thinking about the intensity of his reaction to the current set of rumors spreading about him.

Of course, Xichen had believed him when he informed him of the rumors, and then denied them, because he was so very trusting, and so very his. But that did not erase the white-hot rage that had washed over Jin Guangyao when he heard the rumors being spread about him within his own home. Like something that belonged to Nie Mingjue, not the cold fire Jin Guangyao had stoked so carefully since the day his father first pushed him down the stairs.

For an instant, the world had turned inside, out, his core seeming to spasm to the off beats of his heart. Then it was over, the two most important organs in his body once again at peace.

Xue Yang had attempted to flirt with him using bondage innuendos many a time, but Jin Guangyao had never been tempted. If he desired anyone’s sexual submission, it would hardly be Xue Yang. His preferences ran to rare jade, not common granite.

Jin Guangyao was used to rumors about himself. They had been a fact of his life since before realized he would never earn respect but could seize power, before his own father had kicked him down the stairs rather than spare a moment of his time. His earliest memory was of one of his mother’s customers sneering and ordering her to *get that whore’s spawn out of his sight*.

After his father's vices had turned against him — so sad, Jin Guangyao was devastated — and Jin Guangyao finally took the position he deserved, the gossip had not stopped. Most of the time, people were more careful about maligning his mother's good name within his earshot, but Sect Leader Yao had never possessed a sense of propriety, guilty to his bones of the shamelessness of which he was so fond of accusing others.

The true shame was that Sect Leader Yao was so useful, when there was a rumor he wanted spread. So he had only wished for Sect Leader Yao to fall through the ice of a frozen-over river on his way home and not ensured it would happen.

Another part of that evening ate away at him. The way the sect leaders he'd had the most trouble winning over flocked to A-Su should have pleased him, a sign they were finally coming to heel. But he didn't trust it, not after A-Su's sudden interest in inter-sect politics and initiative with a program he did not believe she had intended to share credit for.

She was so much more the model cultivator, which was part of what had drawn him to her, before he knew the truth of their relation.

But, he thought, reaching inward to feel his core, letting its power wash over him, already grown in magnitude since the summer's end, soon he would have strength in the way that mattered most, in this world where swordsmanship was valued more than cleverness.

It was time for the days' dose, and then to return to the troubles that plagued him outside his lover's arms.

Jin Guangyao sat up, dislodging Xichen's hands from his hair, and searched the sleeve of his discarded outer robe for the bag containing that precious gift, from a worn-down woman who despised him.

"What is that?" Xichen asked, as he shook the vial to mix it.

He had not yet mentioned it to his Erge, wanting to be certain it would have an effect. "A tonic. Our physicians came up with it to help strengthen a core, later in life."

Xichen sat forward, eyes sparkling. "That's revolutionary! You haven't shared it yet?"

"It's very new. We're not yet certain of the limits." He chocked down the dose in one gulp, leaving behind a vile aftertaste that he washed away with a cup of boiled water from the kettle.

Xichen switched from "You're testing it on yourself? But that's so dangerous"

Some things were worth a little risk. He had, of course, had his physicians test its immediate effects, but they thought its effects would still be reduced, the older a cultivator was when beginning to take it. Jin Guangyao had weighed his choices, and picked the option with the highest potential payoff.

But that was one thing Lan Xichen would never understand, for he had never had to earn his place. He was flawless and lovely, and still so naive to the ways of the world.

Rather than explain, he bent to kiss his Erge goodbye, savoring the dazed smile on his face when he pulled away.

Jin Guangyao's good mood lasted only until he entered his bedchamber. Rotting entrails of what he hoped were pigs were draped across every piece of furniture within, stale blood pooled on the floor, not yet completely dry.

Though no note had been left behind, but the culprit was obvious.

The residual warmth of time spent with Erge evaporated instantly.

Several weeks passed before Xue Yang once again escaped from Hanguang-jun, and Lan Wangji hated every minute. In that time, he made a brief trip back to Caiyi to see his son, but it was difficult, knowing he was so close to filling the space in A-Yuan's life that had always been missing.

When 'Xue Yang' finally made an appearance, he fled at the first sign of Hanguang-jun. It was reported by all who witnessed the fight that Hanguang-jun used a multitude of advanced musical cultivation techniques in an attempt to halt him in his path, but Xue Yang was simply too slippery.

If the Jin disciples failed to report that they had again been dosed with disorienting powder, well.

It was the responsibility of the incapacitated to admit fault.

Lan Wangji was not convinced the Jin disciples would have noticed he had merely performed some tricks with light had they been in their right minds.

He did not much care.

So long as Wei Ying met him at the inn in the center of this fishing town in Weihai Luo territory, Lan Wangji cared about very little.

He dropped a piece of silver into a cup held by an elderly man and began to continue on, something about the man's features prickling at his mind.

Lan Wangji paused, turning back towards the man in his ragged robes. He now stood tall, a wild grin distorting lined features. "Wei Ying."

"How did you guess?"

"I know you." Now that he knew Wei Ying was alive, Lan Wangji would recognize him anywhere. "Why this disguise?"

"Hold on, let me —" Wei Ying ducked into an alley, and emerged a moment later wearing the face of the young Nie disciple, his outer layer of exchanged for a set in silver-gray asymmetric zigzagging lines, and a heavy wool cloak. "I was trying to see if the Jin disciples

would let anything slip about where the remaining two I need to take care of have run off to when no one of note was around. No luck. Have you eaten? Get dinner with me.”

“One moment.” Lan Wangji pulled Wei Ying back into the alley, and, removing his mask, kissed him hard.

Wei Ying looked as dazed as he felt when they parted. “Mmm, a very important delay.”

“Extremely important,” He agreed, and kissed him again.

When Wei Ying’s stomach growled, Lan Wangji reluctantly pulled away. But making sure Wei Ying ate well was more important than kissing him for hours. And *after* they’d eaten, there might, perhaps, be a bed.

The implications of two of Wei Ying’s targets going missing hit him only as Wei Ying spooned a third heaping spoonful of chili paste into the gravy of his pork and mushroom noodles.

## Chapter End Notes

Actual massage therapy training takes months, not one evening. Please ignore this for the sake of lwj getting some nice, relaxing (sexy) massages :)

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji worries and reluctantly allows himself to be taken care of and Jiang Yanli takes advantage of a bad situation

## Chapter Notes

The OC in the second half of this chapter is one of the kids Jiang Yanli trains sometimes at Koi Tower. That should be the only important thing about him!

**CW:** light smut (from "But he didn't stop there, moving lower" to end of lwj pov), natural disaster (winter storms), non-detailed descriptions of injuries, coma (very minor character)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Winter maintained its grip on the land, driving temperatures so low that heating talisman expenses climbed toward the stars for those who could afford them, and wood stockpiles ran dangerously short for those who could not. A furious storm released the wrath of the heavens on the seat of Lieshan Du, leaving dozens dead and hundreds injured. Messengers flew swiftly towards Koi Tower, requesting urgent assistance.

Aware of none of this in a cozy room in an inn by the sea, Wei Ying placed a fresh sealing talisman on the windows. The roar of the wind silenced. He stood back with his hands on his hips and gave his work a satisfied nod. "That should do it."

Wei Ying turned, and his face fell when he realized Lan Wangji was still standing near the doorway, watching him, and had yet to remove a single layer of his robes. He did not understand why Wei Ying was being so persistent about the minor issue of Lan Wangji's back, when he had long grown used to the pain.

They should be spending their time planning strategies for how to find the missing Jin disciples as quickly as possible.

Or — his gaze caught on the curve of Wei Ying's neck shining in the candlelight, his parted lips, the strands of hair escaping the band of leather after their earlier activities — pursuing more pleasurable endeavors, and *then* plotting necessary deaths.

Yet other than the brief mention earlier, Wei Ying had not mentioned the obstacle in his path towards keeping his new lease on life, with his soul intact. Lan Wangji worried that Wei Ying was shifting his own problems aside for the sake of others.

Again.

Lan Wangji could not allow that to happen. Not with Wei Ying's life at stake. "Wei Ying. I would like to help you find the missing disciples."

Wei Ying shook his head, with small, indulgent smile. "There's no need. I promise, they'll be found."

"Be found?"

"I shouldn't tell you this, but a frie- I mean, an ally's tracking them down." Wei Ying grimaced at the slip. "I'm just making a nuisance of Xue Yang in the meantime. You should know very well how good I am at being a nuisance."

Lan Wangji was left with far more questions than answers. Who was this mysterious friend of Wei Ying's, when all still living save Lan Wangji himself had denounced him? Why was he so certain the disciples would be found? But he would get no farther with Wei Ying that night if he pushed him.

"Lan Zhan, don't you believe me? Where would I have gotten all this money if I didn't have friends in high places?" He looked flirtatiously through his lashes, in imitation of his youth. An obvious attempt at deflection. "Your Wei Ying would still be very poor."

*His* Wei Ying, because whatever else was happening, Wei Ying believed they belonged to each other.

"I hope you are being a very different kind of nuisance than you were to me." He reached for Wei Ying, pulling him into his arms, and kissed him for good measure.

"Of course you're special, Lan Zhan. The only person I've ever wanted to annoy into loving me." Wei Ying kissed his forehead, a dirty move Lan Wangji could not hope to resist. "Please let me take care of your back?"

Wei Ying would not give up on this doomed attempt to fix him without a fight. Perhaps he could lure Wei Ying into sleeping with him first, at least.

Lan Wangji undid his belt, and the ties of his robes. He hesitated only a moment over Wei Ying seeing the brand over his heart, but he would have to eventually unless Lan Wangji intended never to disrobe during sex, and to use a privacy screen every time he changed for as long as Wei Ying wanted him.

He shrugged the layers off all at once, so they cascaded in ripples to collect in a puddle at his feet.

The way Wei Ying's jaw dropped, stepping forward with a hand extended, was *immensely* satisfactory.



His jaw snapping shut, as he shook his head to clear it, was decidedly less so. “Lie down on your back to start.”

Lan Wangji did so without protest, with his head towards the wall. At least it seemed Wei Ying did not plan to ask about his brand, at the moment, though his gaze lingered on Lan Wangji’s chest in a tragically less than lascivious way.

“That’s the wrong — you know what, I can work with that.” Wei Ying climbed onto the bed, and knelt so his thighs framed Lan Wangji’s head.

Thoughts vanished.

This would perhaps be more pleasurable than Lan Wangji had expected.

But then Wei Ying began to prod at the side of his neck. Unpleasant, and decidedly *not* his shoulder or back. He caught Wei Ying’s hands in his. “Lan *Zhan*, I know this part’s unpleasant. But it’s just to loosen up your first rib, right here,” he traced an arc from his sternum towards where he had been pushing. “So it’ll be more effective when I work on your shoulder. *I* want to gaze dreamily at Hanguang-jun wielding his sword to his full potential again.”

An impossible dream. But Wei Ying did not know the meaning of that word. “If you will spar with me.”

“If you want to knock me into the dirt repeatedly, sure.” His laugh was self-deprecating. Lan Wangji’s least favorite Wei Ying laugh.

“Stop underestimating yourself and you may do whatever this treatment entails.” Though Wei Ying had not yet reached his previous skill level in their fight, when Lan Wangji had still believed him to be Xue Yang, he had made Lan Wangji draw his sword — and lasted long enough to wear down his decreased endurance. That was no small feat.

“Your Wei Ying will perhaps knock you on the ground, sometimes.” It was clear Wei Ying had only decided to humor him, but if he heard and repeated it enough, perhaps one day he would believe it. “Better yet, we’ll spar evenly matched on the rooftops again.”

Lan Wangji hummed, encouraging him to continue.

“More? You want me to get an inflated ego? Well, then. Your Wei Ying is the greatest inventor in all the land.” Wei Ying resumed his prodding, speaking a litany of self-praise he did not believe, but that was none the less true.

The prodding was discomforting enough that Lan Wangji could not entertain detailed thoughts of what he could do if Wei Ying moved a bit further forward, without the pants that currently separated them.

It was not long before Wei Ying stopped, and moved away. “All right, turn over.”

Figuring anything Wei Ying did to his back could only be an improvement, he turned onto his stomach.

When Wei Ying straddled his hips, he inhaled sharply. This time, when Wei Ying's touched him, his hands were coated in a slick cream that he rubbed across his right shoulder. His fingertips then came to rest to the right of Lan Zhan's spine. "I'm going to work on your shoulder first. Tell me if it hurts in a bad way, okay?"

Lan Wangji was unsure how something could hurt in a good way, outside building muscle, but he hummed in agreement.

Wei Ying applied pressure, working in careful circular motions along the muscle. When he pressed on a spot just below the sharp corner of his shoulder blade, it hurt. Just slightly, and in a way that made Lan Zhan have to bite his tongue to prevent himself from telling Wei Ying to never stop touching him *exactly there*.

"That's a tight knot, huh, Lan Zhan? That's because you kept lifting your sword when your back was a mess." Lan Wangji now understood the difference between bad pain, and good. He was also becoming increasingly willing to let Wei Ying do this as often as he wanted, though he still doubted it would do more than temporary pain relief. But if it felt this good, and made Wei Ying happy — that would be enough.

"If you do your stretches and stop using your sword for a few weeks, your core should fix your shoulder in no time." Soon enough, Wei Ying moved to the other side of his muscle, pressing repeatedly between it and his spine. But he switched back and forth once more, and Lan Wangji could feel the muscle loosening under his hands. "Of course, you'll have to *keep* being careful with it until your back is in better shape."

"I'm going to work on your scars now. If anything feels off, let me know immediately, ok? Your scars are tougher than the rest of your skin, and I could hurt you if I get the pressure wrong."

Using a dragging back and forth motion that Lan Wangji could not quite feel on the toughened, raised skin, Wei Ying worked excruciatingly slowly down the path of a scar with his thumbs. The pressure he could feel, deep in his muscles, and in the stretching of the skin surrounding the tight, near immobile areas.

He did not know where Wei Ying could have learned all this. He had lived with a healer for some time, and Lan Wangji did not doubt there had been many with scars in the Burial Mounds, between the war and prison camps, Wei Ying included. But even had he apprenticed to Wen Qing, he would have expected her to teach him only necessities, from the desperate situation he had witnessed. Perhaps, before Lan Wangji's letter had doomed them all, their conditions had improved.

Lan Wangji could not bring himself to ask.

Wei Ying worked down one scar after another, humming under his breath. It was not the song Lan Wangji had little hope Wei Ying remembered, but a comforting lullaby A-Yuan had always loved. He wondered if Wei Ying had sung it for their son first. He soaked in the knowledge as he did every new detail of Wei Ying, each crumb of the intimacy he had craved for so long. In that moment, he felt he could wait for answers, enjoying the process of Wei Ying unveiling his hidden parts bit by bit.

Without conscious effort, Lan Wangji found himself relaxing, the passage of time slipping from his grasp. This was relief, he realized, blinking back a wave of drowsiness. Not the sudden absence of pain, but a reduction, a release of the tension he carried with him in every movement.

Lan Wangji turned to putty before Wei Ying made it halfway through the thirty-three scars.

He came back to reality when he realized Wei Ying had stopped. The reason soon became clear, as Wei Ying slathered another layer of his cream over his upper and mid back, where the worst of his scars were collected.

His lower back had been padded discretely beneath his robes during the punishment, protecting his kidneys without lessening the visual impact of his sentence on watching disciples. The elders wanted his suffering to linger, not grant him a quick death.

Lan Wangji could be thankful for it now, with his heart returned to him.

Wei Ying massaged the cream into his skin with flat palms, soothing it after all the rough work he'd done. But he didn't stop there, moving lower to lightly dig his fingers into Lan Wangji's hips, his thumbs into the muscle on either side of his spine. "Do you feel it there?"

He felt many things. Predominant among them was a sudden spike in the arousal that always simmered within him around Wei Ying, which had begun to build with the gentler massage. But yes, that was the spot that bothered him at times. "Yes."

"Ok, breathe out on three. One, two —"

He breathed out. Wei Ying's thumbs dug in.

And Lan Wangji couldn't help it. He moaned.

Low, and muffled into the sheets, but unmistakable. Wei Ying froze just long enough that Lan Wangji began to worry, but soon continued, telling him when to breathe out, and repeating. Lan Wangji could not help the noises that emerged from him each time any more than he could stop himself from hardening.

He had not known his lower back was such an erogenous zone.

"Fuck, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying whispered hoarsely, and switched to rubbing with his thumbs.

That was a thousand times worse, driving him to desperation in what felt like no time at all. But Lan Wangji was too loose and relaxed to do more than shift against the sheets, a poor substitute for the friction he craved. "Wei Ying. Wei Ying, I need —"

Wei Ying swung his leg back over Lan Wangji's back, leaving him bereft. His protest came out pleading, but Wei Ying was not leaving him. He lay on his side, and urged Lan Wangji to turn into his support. He quickly found he was not the only one affected.

"I have you," Wei Ying barely touched him before he came, collapsing back against him in a haze of bliss and exhaustion.

Wei Ying was still hard, pressed against the back of Lan Wangji's thigh.

*Let me touch you.* Lan Wangji tried to demand, but he did not get the chance. Darkness closed in, and he fell headlong into the deepest sleep he'd had, in as long as he could remember.

The Chief Cultivator and his wife arrived in Lieshan with a contingent of disciples to find that the sect leader had been grievously injured in the storm, and the healers could not say when — or if — she would awaken. The talismans intended to shield the sect's main hall from weather had not been replaced in many years. First there had been the threat of Qishan, then the war, followed by years of mild winters and monsoons that led to complacency.

The roof had caved in under the weight of the snow and force of the wind as Sect Leader Du worked to delegate relief for the surrounding towns. Sect Leader Du was not the only member of her sect injured in the collapse, but she was the worst so still alive. The towns had as yet received very little of the aid she had been organizing, with only the weakest and most easily spared disciples sent out of the stronghold.

The sect leader's son, Du Fengyi, until then a ward of Lanling, had accompanied them to his home. He would have to take on the Sect Leader's duties. Perhaps temporarily. But even temporarily, that was not a burden that should be placed on the shoulders of one just shy of eighteen. When he heard the news, Du Fengyi grabbed the hand of his first disciple hard enough both their knuckles turned white, and tried to blink back tears.

Jiang Yanli knew the damage responsibility could do, when taken on unexpectedly and far too early, all too well.

Jin Guangyao called a meeting with the elders of the sect the moment he arrived, disappearing with them to overview plans over the pleasantries of an ordinary meeting.

Jiang Yanli had volunteered to take Du Fengyi to visit his mother, and see if she could produce order out of the panic-stricken sect. Duties that were well within the bounds of the Chief Cultivator's wife, and so Jin Guangyao had nodded in acquiescence with his usual smile, though she had been unable to shake the feeling that he suspected something since his return from Gusu.

Mo Xuanyu, who had tagged along for reasons unknown, followed her.

Resources that could have been spent on dozens of injured commoners had been diverted exclusively to her, unnecessarily.

Jiang Yanli had many things she wanted to say about that. Fortunately, she had more tact than to express them directly. "I believe the young master would like to see his mother in private. Perhaps I can persuade you to leave one of your colleagues outside the door, and the rest of you to step outside with me."

“Please,” the Sect Heir said pitifully. He cleared his throat, and spoke more firmly. “Do as Jin-furen asks. That goes for our disciples as well.”

His first disciple nodded, and stayed with Jiang Yanli as he went to his mother’s bedside, taking her limp hand in his.

The small army of doctors accompanied her into the hall. They were dressed in identical robes of the grayish purple of their sect, and held themselves stiffly, indignant at her invasion of their territory.

“How many doctors do you have in the sect?” She asked.

The doctors exchanged looks amongst themselves, holding a silent argument over who would have to deal with the intruder.

A short man with a goatee and long mustache that Qin Su noted seemed to be modeled on Lan Qiren’s drew the short straw. “Nine.” There were seven present. “The others are with our injured disciples.”

Not even a single doctor had been sent out to treat the common people. In a determinedly placid tone, she asked, “And the number of severely injured disciples and servants?”

“Eleven, and three servants.”

A not insignificant number, in a sect that numbered no more than seventy cultivators, yet not so many to justify holding back aid. The number of healers was surprising, but then their sect leader was among Jin Guangyao’s closest supporters. Perhaps he had granted her the traditional techniques of the Dafan Wen — leaving out Wen Qing’s revolutionary developments, of course — to elevate her previously undistinguished sect as a token of appreciation.

“You will leave two of your number here, in addition to the one now with your sect leader.” Jiang Yanli thought that was generous, given the circumstances.

The designated spokesman flushed red. “I beg your pardon.”

She ignored him as she did the outcry from the others, preceding at though they had not spoken. “The rest of you will pair up with the doctors accompanying us from Lanling to attend to the injured in surrounding towns.”

“The Sect Leader —”

“Does not need seven doctors attending her at once.” Really. It was not as though the injured sect leader could be treated with so many different spiritual energies at once. That would cause confusion and a strong possibility of further harm. Jiang Yanli did not need to ask Wen Qing to know *that*. Though her — friend had provided a surfeit of useful tips for settling this crisis as efficiently as possible.

Mo Xuanyu did not suppress his laughter quickly enough, and his gleeful expression not at all.

The doctors could argue no further without offering offense to the Chief Cultivator's wife.

"Excellent. Please review these guidelines for determining the order in which the injured will be seen." She handed out copies, penned in a rush by her assistant as preparation were being made for the journey, to each of them. They had traveled as swiftly as possible by horse, as neither Jin Guangyao nor the majority of his disciples could travel such a long distance by sword. Fortunately for Jiang Yanli, as Qin Su could have, but she herself could not, due to Chunsheng's stubborn resistance.

"Gather as many disciples as you can." She told the first disciple. "We'll need them to carry supplies, and help with other tasks. Setting up an infirmary, ensuring everyone has food, helping to patch up buildings."

"I'll bring everyone I can," The first disciple promised, and rushed off to do so.

Half an incense stick later, Jiang Yanli stood in front of the ruins of the reception hall, overseeing the equitable division of supplies by the population size of the towns, and making sure all the items needed for an effective field hospital were included. She'd exchanged her outer robes for a set that would not be ruined by a few bloodstains and a simple woolen cloak, yet unlike during the Sunshot campaign, no one dared to question her authority because of a simple change of clothes.

Mo Xuanyu hovered near her, looking awkward and out of place in court dress and golden-brown furs, watching her more than the preparations. "You're going with them?" he asked.

"I can do more good by acting than waiting around." Jiang Yanli thought that was a very Qin Su thing to say.

Mo Xuanyu frowned, but nodded. "Can I come with you?"

She agreed with a playful tug on his bun, and sent him to find a change of clothes.

*You know he's still spying on you.* It was not a question.

*Of course,* she told Qin Su. *But he doesn't know I know.*

*You still think you can win him over.* Qin Su was of the opinion that Jiang Yanli should wait until more pressing matters had been dealt with to finish 'adopting' Qin Su's demonic cultivator of a half-brother.

*I think it's still worth trying. He deserves better than wasting away as Jin Guangyao's lackey. Demonic cultivation will harm those with far stronger cores than his, like in A-Xian's situation. Mo Xuanyu should get the chance to flirt with his suitors like any other adolescent, without the risk of losing everything for cultivation he can't have chosen.* A-Xian had certainly enjoyed flirting with everyone in Lotus Pier close to his age whether they were a disciple, townspeople, or farmer, before he fell into unacknowledged, informal courting with the boy he still loved.

*There's resentful energy wafting from his sleeves right now.* Qin Su informed her, but that only firmed Jiang Yanli's convictions. Mo Xuanyu was just another boy led to believe he needed to earn his family.

Jin Guangyao emerged from private conference to find the uninjured Lieshan disciples, and a full half of his own, had already been dispatched in all directions. Informed of his wife's actions, the first disciple of Lieshan Du asked if he had not known of her plans.

He gave a strained smile, and said, "Of course I knew. She merely accomplished her goals more quickly than I expected. A credit to your sect, for listening so well."

He arrived in the nearest town to find his wife overseeing a makeshift hospital in the courtyard of the town magistrate's home. The magistrate had sprung for the best protective talismans money could afford, and refreshed them seasonally to ward off fire, flood, and snow, and so the magistrate's family had fared better than most.

Yet they were in no position to argue when Jiang Yanli swept in and demanded room be made to treat everyone - yes, even the low-class courtesans from the collapsed brothel and the street children. And no, the broken wrist of a favorite servant would not be treated until the deep gashes, broken legs, and head injuries sported by many of the townspeople and farmers had been seen to, and the pain of those who could not be saved was eased.

Snow was shoveled, braziers lit, heating talismans applied to pallets, and the wounded brought in. The doctors and disciples worked quickly and efficiently according to her guidelines. Jiang Yanli saw to the patients whose injuries could be treated with needle and threat, and poultices to ward off infection, leaving the most serious cases to the doctors.

Mo Xuanyu was unusually quiet, as he observed the caved in roofs when they entered town, the people huddled close around outdoor fires, lying fevered in one of the few intact homes and remained so as the injured were carried in. He was pale and dwarfed in the drapes of his borrowed wool robes, but determined as he asked to help Jiang Yanli in her work.

Jiang Yanli was showing Mo Xuanyu how to stitch and bandage a gash when Jin Guangyao arrived. She looked up and forced a smile, but continued stitching. Even the Chief Cultivator could wait for a wound to be closed. He seemed to know it, and stood in the entryway of the courtyard, watching her with an inscrutable expression.

*You know,* Qin Su said conversationally. *I didn't know how to do that.*

That could be a problem.

But Jiang Yanli had never been very good at choosing not to help, when she could. She did not regret stepping in.

And it was far more plausible that Qin Su had learned a new skill than that she had been possessed or replaced. Jiang Yanli doubted the possibility would even cross his mind, though it could not help his waning trust in her. None of her actions here could, but Jiang Yanli could not keep playing safe if she intended to win.

“A-Yao,” She left Mo Xuanyu to tie off the bandage and rose, wiping the blood off her hands on a cloth soaked in alcohol.

“I see you have the situation well in hand.” Jin Guangyao showed his dimples like hidden daggers.

“I did not believe it could wait.” She said, the picture of a demure sect leader’s wife. “Now that you’re here, of course I’ll step aside —”

He reached out to grab her elbows, the strength of his grip setting off warning bells from Qin Su.

“No, no, A-Su. Please continue,” Jin Guangyao spoke through gritted teeth. “I believe my time would be better served observing the situation in the other towns. Give them a *personal* touch. You should stay right here, and help these people.”

She did her best not to shrink back from him . “If you think that’s best.”

Only when Jin Guangyao had left did Qin Su speak. *His grip was never that strong before. Careful, and measured, not —*

*It’s strange,* Jiang Yanli agreed, and got back to work.

When all that remained to do was monitor the severely injured, Jiang Yanli returned to the Du Sect’s headquarters. She found the sect heir — or rather, acting sect leader — still in his mother’s sickroom, bent over a stack of reports brought back from the closer towns.

“These casualty numbers.” Du Fengyi said when he noticed her presence, Mo Xuanyu still stuck on her heels. “How many died because we were so slow to act?”

He seemed to have aged decades in a day, a shadow of the boy so easily flustered by his friend’s teasing about his skill with a sword. He had only recently learned to stop reversing his grip on the hilt, and had so much more to learn. She wondered if he would ever get the chance.

“I’ve been working on a plan for medical clinics that could reasonably be constructed in any large town.” It was not, in fact, only Jiang Yanli’s plan in its entirety. She had merely added funding and logistics to Wen Qing’s brilliance. “Perhaps I could leave a copy of the plans with you?”

Acting Sect Leader Du Fengyi thanked her effusively and repeatedly. Jiang Yanli felt somewhat bad for taking advantage of his state and inexperience, but if anything she had helped to strengthen his position.

He was not nearly so effusive in thanking Jin Guangyao, when he arrived. After all, Jin Guangyao was not a well-liked teacher who had removed the need to manage disaster in a time of personal turmoil.

On the way back to Lanling the next day, Mo Xuanyu spent the journey looking back and forth between his brother, and the woman in the body of his unknown sister with a strange set



to his jaw, the rest of his expression unreadable beneath his habitual mask.

## Chapter End Notes

The massage techniques wwx uses are all real! Part is based on things my physical therapist has done to me (in a professional way), part on the reading I did/videos I watched on cross-friction massage for breaking up scar tissue, and part is just sensual massage.

Unfortunately, it's very possible for a tight upper back from working at a desk/service counter/lab bench to make it easier to injure surrounding muscles and tendons doing things like walking home with a heavy bag of groceries. So lwj's stiff scar tissue and regular lifting a heavy sword hurt his rotator cuff, but he is lucky enough to have a golden core to fix it.

WQ would probably use acupuncture and cupping on lwj's scars, but those are (1) more advanced and (2) cupping hurts me more than getting tattooed. I'm sure lwj could handle it, but I can't 😊

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

Wangxian are in their honeymoon phase (but soft), Jin Guangyao receives a package, and Qin Su makes a discovery.

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay (again)! I took a break from this to write [40 k of fluff](#). And it looks like the break helped, because I wrote this chapter in 2 days!

**CW:** light smut (*have I told you recently how much to The next time Lan Zhan found him*, wwx's self-worth problems/thoughts about having to kill people to survive, mentions of lwj's chronic pain, violence against a prisoner (jgy pov), wen qing's continued assumptions she's doomed, mentions of past torture/body parts

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The lingering deep freeze broke without warning, leaving patches of slippery ice, and mud and slush to stain the robes and freeze the feet of those unfortunates forced to travel at the worst time of year for adventures.

Wei Wuxian had never been more thankful for his restored golden core. Limited as it was by Xue Yang's cultivation, at least he could travel by sword again.

As he waited for news from Nie Huaisang, he traversed the lands surrounding Lanling, putting in showy appearances by Xue Yang. Yet what he was, really, was giddily in love, waiting in breathless anticipation for the next time he would see his Lan Zhan.

The next time he met Lan Zhan was at a cozy inn on the edge of a still frozen-over lake. Wei Wuxian was seated around a table with one other Nie cultivator, and a group of local merchants, sharing the most salacious sect gossip from around the cultivation world. The Nie disciple, a muscular young woman with high cultivation who was nonetheless one of Nie Huaisang's favorite spies, had come to tell him they were narrowing in on the missing Jin disciples' trail.

She was also, maybe, flirting with him a little. Without real intent — she'd mentioned a sweetheart back home, with the far-off expression Shijie had when thinking of her husband and, more recently, Wen Qing — so he jokingly flirted back in a silly, exaggerated manner, finding it felt *good* to socialize with someone who had no expectations for who he was. To

her, he was just the ridiculous new shixiong who didn't know the first thing about saber spirits, but came up with exciting new talismans and challenges for the disciples.

His excitement was dampened by the knowledge that she, and all those other disciples who had so enjoyed the talisman rides to the ceiling, would shun him immediately if they knew the truth.

But for the moment, he could laugh freely and pretend the world no longer hated him.

He noticed the moment Lan Zhan entered the inn. Everyone did, as the door opened with a rush of freezing wind to reveal *the* Hanguang-jun.

Wei Wuxian cut off mid-sentence and utterly forgot his conversation in favor of grinning idiotically at his zhiji.

Lan Zhan approached his table, and stood behind his chair without uttering a word.

Pinching his nose, he sighed. *Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, you're lucky I know you.*

"Oh, should I —" The Nie disciple started to stand.

"No, stay." Wei Wuxian stood, turning towards the man who drew him like a moth to a lantern. "Hanguang-jun is not much for crowds. I'll share our information with him in private."

"You... will?" The poor confused disciple frowned, unaware of who Lan Zhan was to him.

There was a certain smugness in the set of Lan Zhan's jaw as Wei Wuxian led him back to his room. He stepped aside so Lan Zhan could enter first, and found himself backed up against the wall inside. Lan Zhan looking *down* at him, because of course he was still wearing those stupid, sexy heeled boots despite his back pain.

"What's this for?" Cradling Lan Zhan's jaw, he swiped his thumb over his lips.

"You know me," Lan Zhan said, with no further explanation. But it was enough for Wei Wuxian to know he had been jealous, when he spotted him laughing with someone else, and appeased when Wei Wuxian anticipated his desires so quickly.

"I do know you," They had not kissed yet, so wound his arms around Lan Zhan's neck and fixed that, until Lan Zhan let his weight fall on Wei Wuxian.

"I brought you this," Lan Zhan said, when their lips parted, holding up a ribbon so close in front of Wei Wuxian's eyes he had to blink repeatedly to stop it from splitting in two.

It was, of course, red.

He melted.

"Have I told you recently how much I adore you? I can't wear that in public right now, but — hmm, maybe I could tie it around my thigh, so you'll always know it's there waiting for you."

Lan Zhan dropped to his knees, taking the ribbon with him.

“Ah?”

His long, precise fingers began to work at the ties of Wei Wuxian’s robes, and all he could do was stare. Lan Zhan parted his robes efficiently, and hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants. Pulling them down around his thighs, Lan Zhan exposed him completely.

Deftly, he tied the ribbon around Wei Wuxian’s right thigh.

“Oh, you really liked that idea, didn’t you?” He tried to tease, but his voice came out breathless. Lan Zhan was a vision on his knees, and Wei Wuxian was only human.

Lan Zhan took him in hand, and began to bring him to his mouth.

Wei Wuxian’s head thunked back against the wood behind him, as he struggled to remember why this was a bad idea. “Lan Zhan, your back —”

“My knees are uninjured,” He said, lovely in his petulance, and proceeded to suck Wei Wuxian’s soul out through his dick.

Later, when Wei Wuxian got out the salve and directed Lan Zhan to lie bare-chested on the bed, he protested far less over his treatment than before.

If letting Lan Zhan give him sexual favors — within reason — convinced him to let Wei Wuxian help him heal — so he was healthy and could wield Bichen safely, and maybe also so they could get acrobatic together — who was he to complain?

The next time Lan Zhan found him, it was one of those rare, unseasonably warm evenings, and Wei Wuxian was reclining on the roof of his inn. He had used a heating talisman of his own design to warm the tiles, and thought he might just nap there for an hour, before going inside to sleep in a bed.

Nie Huaisang had sent word that the Jin disciples were located, all the way south in Baling and preparing to flee further, past the furthest reaches of the allied sects. In the morning, he would have to fly fast and far. Chasing down two people who were terrified, all because they had harmed someone who deserved it.

Just so Wei Wuxian himself could live.

He knew the trusted cronies of Jin Guangyao could not have clean hands. Usually that knowledge was enough. Perhaps these cultivators were among those who had hung his Wens like discarded trash. Perhaps they had aided in the destruction of the clan Jin Guangyao blamed for the murder of his son.

But he did not know, and tonight, with a half-empty bottle of wine by his side, and two empty ones overturned against the bottom tiles, staring up at the crescent moon and constellations, the melancholy he had been chasing away since his rebirth caught up with him.

Who was he to deserve this second chance? Who was he to trade his life for those of others?

Who was Shijie to have made that decision for him?

Then out of nowhere, Lan Zhan landed on the roof, settling onto his knees beside him. Wei Wuxian looked at him and thought he might have a reason.

Lan Zhan held out a long, thin tube to him and Wei Wuxian blinked at it in surprise — but no, it stayed a dizi. A very pretty white bone spiritual tool of a dizi, just waiting for a cultivator to come along and claim it. It could only be the work of an artisan from the Cloud Recesses. No one else was capable of producing such an instrument.

He could not accept it.

“I’m not using demonic cultivation, Lan Zhan, you know that.” Though he still didn’t know why, could never know why.

“I thought...” Lan Zhan’s ears flushed under the light of the stars. “Maybe we could...”

“With me? You want to —”

They made quite the pair. Full grown adult cultivators, who slept together, unable to say the word “duet.”

He laughed, the sound flying up into the clouds above. “Let me warm up a little, get used to playing again, and then maybe we can play together.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan looked down at his lap, hands curling to fists in his robes. “I would like that.”

The flute screeched for a moment at first, turning out to require far less pressure from his lungs than Chenqing to produce sound. Chenqing always felt like it was steeling the air from his lungs, forcing him to put more and more of himself into his playing, even as his soul was tainted by the Tiger Seal. Even so, he’d played on for hours.

This should be easy, in comparison, if he could reign himself in. Having Lan Zhan there made control simultaneously harder, and the easiest thing he had ever done.

He fiddled around on the nice, fancy, but entirely unresentful spiritual flute for a while, getting it used to the feel of his spiritual energy as his fingers remembered how to move across the holes.

Wanting to test his abilities, he launched into the first song that came to mind. He closed his eyes, the notes washing over him like a precious memory, though he could not recall where it came from. Opening them, he found Lan Zhan’s jaw wide open and his eyes shining with unshed tears.

He dropped the flute, catching it quickly between his knees, not wanting to ruin Lan Zhan’s gift, and reached out to wipe his tears away with his thumbs.

“That song. You know it?”

“I wrote it.” Lan Zhan — Hanguang-jun — sniffled. “It’s yours.”

His own eyes stubbornly began to water even as he smiled wide in disbelief. Lan Zhan returned the favor, leaving them cradling each others’ faces like fools, caught in each others’ eyes. Then, so quietly he had to strain to hear him, Lan Zhan whispered, *Wangxian*.

And the Yiling Patriarch kissed Hanguang-jun under the moonlight.

When Lan Zhan had been thoroughly kissed — never sufficiently, but enough for the moment — and his own lips swollen from liberal application of teeth, he followed Lan Zhan’s lead in filling the air with the sound of *their* song.

Later, much later, long past the hour when Lan Zhan should have been sleeping, Wei Wuxian straddled his hips on the bed, Lan Zhan bleary-eyed and making soft noises under the ministrations of his hands.

His thumbs hurt like crazy, even with the benefit of his core. Wen Qing had given him stretches to do on his hands, so he didn’t wreck them helping Lan Zhan. But characteristically, he forgot them most days.

Lan Zhan’s shoulder, though, was improving quickly, and Wei Wuxian trusted he was diligently doing his exercises. The improvement in itself testified that he had at least followed Wei Wuxian’s advice, and refrained from swinging his sword around.

Of course, his back would take much longer, with the need to push past the residue the spiritual whip had left. But if Lan Zhan kept it up, short uses of Bichen would even be advisable, to build strength and help his spiritual energy regain its proper flow.

Tonight, Lan Zhan would likely fall asleep even before he even finished the massage.

So, it was the perfect time to ask a question he would prefer Lan Zhan did not remember. “What is good and what is evil?”

“Wei Ying is good.” Lan Zhan mumbled into the sheets.

He choked, heat blazing across his face. “Lan Zhan! Have you no shame? That was a serious question!”

“That was a serious answer.” Lan Zhan insisted, a hint of a whine in his voice.

“You’re so sweet. And silly, oh my heavens.” He dug his thumbs in around the base of Lan Zhan’s spine, and his whine took on a different tenor. “Your uncle would have aneurysm if he knew.”

Lan Zhan hummed, and Wei Wuxian could tell he was smiling into his pillow.

“No, but seriously. Am I going too far?”

His zhiji, the other half of his soul, and the most infuriatingly obstinate man ever born, laughed at him.

Actually laughed.

Hanguang-jun!

It was soft, and almost inaudible, more a shaking of his chest than a sound, yet it matched the song Lan Zhan had written for him in beauty.

“I would do far worse to keep you,” he said and, just like that, as Wei Wuxian shifted into the gentle, sweeping portion of the massage, Lan Zhan fell asleep.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, what am I supposed to do with you?” He asked his profile, an overwhelming fondness welling up in his chest.

It was a question Lan Zhan had already answered.

Keep him.

In the early hours of the morning, Wei Wuxian left Lan Zhan still asleep, clutching the blankets to his chest in Wei Wuxian’s place, with a careful kiss on the forehead.

Wei Wuxian might not deserve this second chance. He might even be just slightly frustrated with his beloved shijie, for the first time in his life, for forcing it on him. But when he got *this* out of it, Wei Wuxian was going to damn well do his best to keep it.

Lan Wangji could not spend New Years with Wei Ying, though he wanted to, because he could not spend the holiday with both Wei Ying and A-Yuan. He had spent too much time away from A-Yuan lately already, and it was important that he make the holiday.

So he returned to Gusu, and spent every moment with his son that he could, even letting A-Yuan stay up past curfew telling stories until his little-used voice went hoarse, like he used to. The moments he did not spend with A-Yuan, A-Yuan was Sizhui, playing quietly with his classmates and steering Jingyi away from trouble.

Lan Wangji spent those moments kneeling in his seat at the front of the banquet hall, refusing to let a single flash of emotion show, even to his brother.

“Do you need any help with the —” Xiongzhang spoke Xue Yang’s name in a fake cough “—problem?”

When Uncle glanced at Xiongzhang in concern, Lan Wangji noticed, but Xiongzhang did not. “I do not.”

“It’s only, you’re usually so efficient.” He sipped his tea as punctuation. “I’m concerned.”

“Xue Yang is tricky. However, I am more than enough to handle him.” Or would have been if he were not already dead. Wei Ying he could handle in an entirely different way.

He should not think about Wei Ying in front of Xiongzhong, he reminded himself, as his ears flushed with tell-tale heat.

“I know you are.” Xiongzhong’s smile was intended to be reassuring. “I’m here if you need to tell me anything, you know that, right?”

Xiongzhong was not, not truly.

But Wei Ying was, now. Wei Ying, who refused to let him suffer a punishment he had agreed to any longer, yet refused to let him help as sands of a year-long hourglass ticked down the time he had left.

The more Wei Ying’s treatments proved him wrong, allowed him to move with less pain than he had since the day he betrayed his clan for Wei Ying, the more Lan Wangji itched to know the truth of these mysterious allies.

And the identity of the mastermind they sought to take down.

It would be a lie to say he did not have his suspicions, and Lan Wangji had not lied to himself since he admitted he was in love with Wei Ying.

As soon as he could take his leave after the holiday celebrations, Lan Zhan departed Gusu with three bottles of Emperor’s Smile, and a carton of oranges. The expression on Wei Ying’s face was more than worth it.

“You brought me —” Wei Ying was open with delight, his smile as blinding as the day they’d first met. “And oranges? These are *not* in season! How far did you import these from? Nevermind, come here.”

They curled together on the bed, a bottle of wine and several oranges nestled into the covers with them. Wei Ying peeled an orange between unusually small, savoring sips, discarding the pieces of peel into a dish. Eating in bed was against the rules unless one was ill, of course, but Lan Zhan did not have to be drunk to relish this small violation.

He was a little drunk anyway, having stolen a sip from Wei Ying’s mouth, unable to resist a droplet of wine that trailed from the corner of his mouth. For the first time while drunk, Lan Wangji did not attempt to go anywhere. The circle of Wei Ying’s arms were exactly where he wanted to be.

Wei Ying popped an orange slice into his mouth, and then held one out to Lan Wangji. He took it delicately between his lips, leaning on Wei Ying’s shoulder. The next slice, he stole from between Wei Ying’s lips, trailing a hand down to his bare chest to cup him through his pants.

“I want you.” He said, and then, though it was different to force the words free, “I want — more. Then we’ve been doing.”



Though he could see Wei Ying wanted to, he swallowed, and pushed Lan Zhan's hand away. "Not yet. Your back's still healing."

Lan Zhan turned away to hide his pout, though Wei Ying quickly lured him back with more orange slices and gentle, teasing kisses along his neck.

Wei Ying continued to treat him like he was fragile, despite the marked improvement. He refused to move beyond hands and mouths in particular positions, continued to give more than he took.

He would allow it, for now. But it could not go on forever.

Jin Guangyao had once thought of his rooms as a private sanctuary, but no longer. Now, his only sanctuary lay among the clouds, in the arms of a flawless jade who had sworn to be his, yet in truth never could be.

He had scrambled to enhance the security of his wards, to no avail, and Xue Yang continued to drop periodic gifts of avian viscera through his window like a cat paying tribute to its owner. He was not *afraid* to return to his room each night. He could handle Xue Yang, so long as he did not have the element of surprise.

Jin Guangyao simply approached his rooms each night with an entirely appropriate abundance of caution.

Resentful energy emanated from his bedroom. Though none had been evident in Xue Yang's previous visits, Jin Guangyao took that as proof he had left behind something truly repulsive.

He opened the door cautiously, feeling for any sense of a curse on the other side — nothing. Opening it all the way, he stopped short, and stared at the object sitting in the middle of his bed.

Jin Guangyao clutched the sliding door for support, thinking himself transported into a nightmare.

Approaching slowly, ever so cautiously, he found there were indents around the iron in the covers, proving that something was, actually there.

He began to reach out for it — stopped. Drew a talisman in the air instead, checking for curses.

There was a little one, intended to bite, that he removed with a careful application of spiritual power. Otherwise — nothing. Still, he did not dare touch the iron directly. Jin Guangyao had done so exactly one before and suffered the taint on his core for a month after. His core had not grown so large under Wen Qing's new treatment that he intended to risk it.

Wrapping it carefully in a cloth, he bound the close closed with suppressing talismans, and sealed the iron in a qiankun bag.

Beneath it was a note.

*I believe this belongs to you*, it read, in no handwriting he recognized.

Jin Guangyao did not react inappropriately. He was very confused, yes, but he was a rational man, with a rational approach to matters.

Calmly, he sat on his bed.

Calmly, he drew his sword.

And calmly, he blasted a hole through the floor into the heating system below.

Then, he got to his feet, and went to visit his most useful and most dangerous guest, his thoughts a maelstrom on the way.

Wen Qing looked up from a text to eye him apathetically. As always, she would have little to show him until he threatened her brother.

This new factor was a mystery, and Jin Guangyao despised mysteries that affected him directly.

But it almost certainly had something to do with his sister.

His sister was forming a power base of her own, and while at first, he had believed A-Su's claims that she was becoming more active in politics to better assist him, he did not trust the way his detractors flocked to her. The manner in which she stole the initiative in Lieshan had only confirmed his suspicions.

Yet it would not be so easy to dispose of A-Su as it would have been less than a year earlier, when she was merely a mourning mother and had not shown the vivacious side she had used to charm him, before he knew, to all and sundry.

A-Su could not have gained the knowledge to handle the disaster so efficiently on her own, yet he knew from the application of a truth-telling talisman that his own physicians had not aided her. That left two equally unbelievable options: A-Su had help in Gusu, or she had found Wen Qing.

Erge would never betray him, and Lan Wangji only bothered with politics when there was something he could batter with his sword, though Jin Guangyao had no doubt he hated him.

Wen Qing was hidden, and well, but Xue Yang had gotten through his wards. Perhaps he had gotten through hers, at first, and used knowledge gleaned from her to infiltrate surrounding buildings. Perhaps there was something dark and slithering in her eyes.

"What is this?" He demanded, tossing the bag on the table.

She picked up a brush delicately from a writing set, off to the side, and poked at it with the sharp end. A wisp of resentful energy escaped its trappings. "Well, it certainly feels like Yin Iron. I thought Xue Yang ran away with the last piece?"

“Like you don’t know.”

“Know what?” She blinked, pretending innocence, and an uncontrollable fury swept through him.

“Stop pretending!” He grabbed her by the collar of her robes, dragging her bodily up towards his face. “Who have you been talking to, you bitch? Don’t think I won’t kill you and your precious brother when I find out.”

Though her heart hammered in her chest at the mention of the Ghost General, her words remained detached. “Who have I talked to? Only my imagination, I suppose. The sound of the footsteps in the ceiling, perhaps.”

He dropped her, all at once, horrified at himself.

She fell in a sprawl, bracing herself on her hands, head tilted back to expose the long column of her delicate neck, unnaturally pale from lack of sunlight. How easily he could crush it. A victim, his prisoner, yet Wen Qing was able to address him unphased even now. When he held everything, she cared about in the palm of his hands.

“Did you think I was still entirely sane after all these years?” She asked. “You’re lucky I’m lucid. Assuming, of course, this is real.”

He snatched the qiankun bag from the table, stuffing it back up his sleeve.

Wen Qing had very nearly outlived her usefulness. Those last few journals of the Yiling Patriarch translated, and he could finally do away with her. He had gotten what he wanted.

Why, then, the rage that still beat within his veins, refusing to cool into icy, logical revenge?

Something had changed within him since he began taking Wen Qing’s tonic. And he knew, as he narrowly avoided drawing Hensheng on a servant passing by the entrance to the Fragrance hall, that it was not for the better.

Yet how could he stop when it was delivering everything he lacked?

Additional meditation would likely reduce the worst of his side effects. He would add a dedicated slot to his daily schedule.

Wen Qing waited until her hands had stopped shaking to call Jiang Yanli back.

“A-Qing?” Yanli asked, worry apparent in her voice, as unaware of what that endearment meant to Wen Qing as ever.

“Jin Guangyao came for a visit.” She admitted only because “He was... displeased.”

“Are you all right? Did he hurt you?” Yanli cared so very much, and Wen Qing loved her for it, though it was dangerous to admit. Even to herself.

She could not deny it anymore, however. Not after that last visit, when Yanli made her feel alight with life, almost like her own self again.

But Wen Qing did not want Yanli's worry.

"This is a good sign." She said, pleased with the steadiness of her tone. "We want him unstable."

"I don't care about that. Can I come see you?" Yanli pleaded, sounding desperate. "I want to see for myself."

"No, no. I'm fine. Besides, tonight he might come back." Wen Qing wanted to kiss her, to bury her head between Jiang Yanli's thighs and think of nothing but the taste of her as Yanli urged her on. In this state, she might actually do it.

She could not let that happen.

"I'm going to kill him." Yanli practically growled, a reminder that though she was far more contained than her brothers, she grew from the same roots.

It was far too attractive a sound for Wen Qing's good. She had not known time spent with a voice alone could ruin her like this, until she had spent so many hours hanging on Yanli's every word.

But she was not good. She was not well. And she was never leaving this room alive.

No matter what, her brother came first. Yanli would understand, though she would attempt to avert the inevitable if she knew.

"We have plans for that, remember?" She teased.

"Yes, of course." Yanli regained her usual propriety, and Wen Qing was not disappointed. "Is there anything I can do for you now?"

"Nothing you're not already doing, A-Li. You always make me feel better." Wen Qing said, and cursed herself for admitting it. For letting the intimate endearment slip.

Yet she could not regret it too much, when Yanli sounded so very pleased. "Oh. I — You've made my return to life so much brighter. I spend every day anticipating hearing your voice."

Warmth flooded spaces in her heart Wen Qing had thought long dead.

She imagined her, eyes half-lidded and crawling over Wen Qing's body, intent on rewarding her — and shook off the fantasy.

When the time came, her inexorable fate would hurt Yanli. And so, Wen Qing would say nothing of her feelings, though she was increasingly certain they were returned. Yanli was only just recovering from the loss of the love of her life. She did not deserve to love Wen Qing and lose her as well.

It was for the best.

Yet Wen Qing could not stop herself from soaking in every scrap of attention Jiang Yanli was willing to spare.

Qin Su had a theory.

This theory stated: The reason they could not find where Mo Xuanyu went to practice his demonic cultivation was because its entry was hidden where none but family could find it.

The highest concentration of resentful energy in Koi Tower was in the treasure room. This could easily have been attributable to the number of items collected from Wen Ruohan. But she had her doubts.

She slid easily into the body of a tawny fish owl with mottled brown-black feathers, and pushed open a window into the Fragrance hall's entryway, just across from the mirror. The wards on the mirror were not designed to stop an animal, but they still recognized her as human. Recognized her as a Jin by blood, and allowed her through without protest.

She detested the idea that her blood was imprinted into her soul, but did not hesitate to use it.

Systematically, she had already poked through each row of the Treasure Room one by one on previous visits. Only the final row remained. At first it seemed like she would find nothing more than her other attempts.

Qin Su poked her head behind yet another curtain, obscuring a display case. There was a pot, a figurine, an urn, and on the fourth shelf down — a map. A map, given its own shelf in an overcrowded Treasure Room.

She hopped fully onto the shelf to inspect it more closely, and saw nothing unusual. Just a map of the Cultivation World, as it was at the height of Wen Mao's reign. Nothing resentful about it. It should have been displayed on a wall, if it was important, perhaps in one of the smaller banquet halls. After all, the earliest inception of Lanling Jin was on that map.

She picked at it with her beak, and it fell forward, revealing a lever obscured in the wall.

Of course, she pulled the lever.

The display case swung out, carrying her with it, revealing a staircase passage that crept downward past the last hint of light

If she were still alive, still entirely human, Qin Su would have balked at entering. The owl whose body she was riding certainly did.

But Qin Su no longer had anything to fear in darkness, and flew on down the stairs. Looking through the nocturnal eyes of her owl, enhanced by her own as-yet nebulous relationship with resentful energy, she had no need of light.

The first room she came across was obviously used for dissections. A stone slab filled the center of the room, a few old, bloody stains splashed on the slab and floor. It had been abandoned for some time, but the room's resentment still cried with the pain of torture and desecration.

Next came an alcove along the length of a passage, regularly visited, that was almost like a shrine. Within it, a talisman covered head it took a few moments to recognize. When she did, Qin Su would have gasped, if she had a mouth capable of such a thing.

Instead, she let out a startled hoot and flapped on down the passageway.

Sang-di would be very interested in learning what her so-called husband had done with his brother's head.

The third room was a larger space, sparkling clean, with bowls, instruments for mixing, and jars of ingredients stacked on shelves. The ingredients, however, were no less grotesque than the dissection room. Eyeballs glared from a glass pickling jar and others were labeled with titles like "desiccated hearts (human)" and "dirt of a murderer's grave."

A notebook had been left open on the counter.

Qin Su glanced at it, realized its contents were too complex for her to report back to Wen Qing or Wei Wuxian, and moved on. At least she had found where Mo Xuanyu researched and Xue Yang had once butchered.

Finally, she came to a line of dungeon cells. Empty, it seemed at first, and unoccupied for as long as Xue Yang's dissection room. Until she reached the very end of the row. Within, chains bound to posts inscribed with talismans reached back towards a dark, ragged mass back against the wall.

Qin Su squeezed the owl through the bars to get a closer look — and it was exactly as she had expected.

She had never seen the Ghost General in person, but the gentle face marred with black veins was exactly as his sister had described. And there, peaking through Wen Ning's tattered sleeve, was the matched pair to Wen Qing's curse.

He was as undead as he had ever been, with more resentful energy packed into his body than she had ever felt in one place. And he was insensible. Remained so, even as she battered his head with her wings, and carefully poked at his skin with her claws, as not to draw blood.

Qin Su could not tell exactly what was wrong with him, in the midst of all that resentment. Part of it felt off. Wrong, like it came from a separate, less expert source than the force that animated him. She would need more time to pinpoint its cause, and had already left the passage open for far too long.

For now, she had to leave. But an unconscious Ghost General was more than they'd had before.

## Chapter End Notes

There's still a ways left to go in nano, so I should be able to update more often for a bit  
<3

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Summary

Su She gets one chapter to cause problems. Lan Wangji makes a questionable decision.

## Chapter Notes

Nano does wonders for my writing speed

**CW:** brief mention of death in childbirth, hangover side-effects, minor character death

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

In the end, the final Jin disciples were no more difficult to deal with than their deceased sect siblings. Just harder to find. Wei Wuxian found them together, in a border town in the south of Baling, attempting to overcharge the magistrate for a simple liberation of a young woman who died in childbirth, who simply wanted to know if her daughter had survived.

Wei Wuxian might have terrified the townspeople just a little bit, appearing as Xue Yang in a dramatic cloud of smoke, but he'd done them a favor really, saving them from extortion. It had been more difficult flying over Yunmeng as quickly as he could than it was stabbing one in the gut, and the other through the heart.

Rather than leave their bodies for the townspeople to deal with, Wei Wuxian dropped them off just outside the Ouyang stronghold, leaving a declaration of *Xue Yang was here* and a crude drawing on the compound's exterior wall.

Baling as a whole was far too much like Yunmeng, with its piers and the water-based livelihoods of its people, for his emotional stability. And he certainly did not want to go back through Yunmeng again. Which meant skirting to the south, into a kingdom where small sects were kept under a king's rule, and the people spoke a different language.

Keeping to the border towns, he was able to find merchants and innkeepers who were bilingual — as Jiang Cheng was, to better deal with his Gan-speaking neighbors, while Wei Wuxian had been told to keep to his cultivation — and find a bird to send word ahead for Lan Zhan to meet him in Moling.

He really should make Lan Zhan a Speaking Stone, to make their arrangements more private, and let him hear Lan Zhan's voice even when they were apart. But explaining the Speaking



Stones would lead Lan Zhan to wonder who he was speaking *with*, and he was already more than curious enough.

Lan Zhan's surprise of Emperor's Smile distracted him from telling him of the disciples' demise immediately, and then Lan Zhan was drunk and adorable and determined to cuddle with him until his heart gave out.

Not telling Lan Zhan immediately was, most likely, his mistake.

But before Lan Zhan was drunk and adorable, they had dinner in the dining room while the inn cleaned out a room.

It was not exactly an easy feat to eat through a wooden mask. That had presented a problem, when he often needed to eat with the teams of Jin disciples Nie Xiaomeng "saved" or with other folk to spread gossip. It had taken some time and improvisation, but he managed to modify the cut of the mask to exclude the mouth, while maintaining the illusion over it.

Lan Zhan was unappreciative of his efforts; however, and refused to kiss him with his mask on.

Woe was him.

At least he had no doubts about how attractive Lan Zhan found him.

The cuisine in Moling was not dissimilar from that of the common people of Gusu. Which was to say, more flavorful than in the Cloud Recesses, and a delightful fondness for braising meats in wine, but nowhere near spicy enough. The food served in this inn a day's ride by horse north of the Moling capital was a typical example.

When the sect leader himself walked in, Wei Wuxian did not need to ask to determine why Nie Huaisang had suggested this inn.

The sect leader — Su She, Wei Wuxian had been reminded of his name enough times to remember it, though he was an exceedingly bland man — caught sight of Hanguang-jun and sneered. Wei Wuxian would have recognized him anywhere, from the description he'd been given. In those white and blue robes, just slightly off from the colors and styles of the Lan, the silver guan tooled by a second-class artisan, he could hardly have been anyone else.

With a jerk of his head, Su She sent his disciples off to a seat, and started towards them. Lan Zhan stiffened as he approached, and took a seat at their table.

Wei Wuxian set a calming hand on Lan Zhan's arm, but unusually, it did not seem to help.

He had, apparently, met Sect Leader Su during the guest lectures at Cloud Recesses. Nie Huaisang told him he was a former Lan disciple who had infamously — among the gossips of the guest disciples — been saved by Lan Zhan during the Waterborne Abyss incident. Only to repay him with betrayal.

Wei Wuxian didn't remember him, even faintly. But he was predisposed to dislike the coward for what he'd done to Lan Zhan.

“Hanguang-jun. And?” Su She carried himself with self-importance, despite his utterly unremarkable presence. Considering he had founded a sect, Wei Wuxian supposed he must have a talent for something. Other than being obnoxious, that something was not immediately apparent.

“This humble one is Nie Xiaomeng.” He inclined his head politely, but did not rise as would be considered obligatory. when greeting a sect leader.

“A Nie?” His sneer deepened. “I suppose if you can’t have a traitor, someone useless will do.”

Nie Huaisang had put on a very good show, to convince his fellow sect leaders of his sect’s decline in only the two years since his brother’s murder. All the while hiding the records that showed Qinghe was as well-tended and profitable as ever.

Lan Zhan stared off into the distance, refusing to react to Su She’s existence.

“Hanguang-jun’s friendship does me honor.” He slid his fingers between Lan Zhan’s as he spoke, linking them together.

“Does it.” Su She glanced at Lan Zhan in obvious distaste. “Did he tell you how he stood against the clans over a few relics of the Yiling Patriarch, and his family dragged him home in shame?”

“I prefer to judge a person’s character for myself, Su-zongzhu.” He said. “Perhaps you would like to take your meal with your disciples?”

It was absolutely out of line for a disciple not of the main line to suggest such a thing to the leader of another sect. Wei Wuxian didn’t care. Lan Zhan didn’t deserve to be maligned over Wei Wuxian. He wasn’t worth it.

Su She gave an ugly ass. “Oh, and how did you judge that? The shape of his ass?”

His appreciation of Lan Zhan’s ass notwithstanding, Su She wasn’t worthy of licking *Wei Wuxian’s* boots much less ogling Lan Zhan. “Hanguang-jun is an honorable, forthright man who aids those with nothing to offer in return. And you’re sitting here slandered his name to his face. Lan Zhan’s right, you aren’t qualified to speak to us.”

Su She turned purple in the face, but did not dare challenge him in front of Hanguang-jun, even with his disciples watching. Whispering, as they looked between their Sect Leader, the man he failed to emulate, and the utter unknown getting under his skin.

Then, a snake-like grin slid onto his face, giving the impression he was slithering though he had not budged from his seat. He blinked like a snake too. “Did you just say Lan Zhan?”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened against his will. No one called Lan Wangji Lan Zhan. No one except him.

“I suppose you *are* his type. Pretty, shallow, and disrespectful.” Su She paused, before adding, “Possibly treasonous.”

He gripped Lan Zhan's hand hard just in case he was considering lunging over the table. To him, an insult like that was laughable. A far cry from the harem and baby-eating rumors. But these days, Lan Zhan was almost as touchy over him as he had once been over Shijie and Jin Zixuan. Ironical that his temper had improved — regaining most of his dead or thought dead family had really put things in perspective — while Lan Zhan's frayed at the edges.

A server approached, giving Su She a nervous glance. "Honored guests, your room is ready."

Su She did not miss the singular. "One room. Really? I thought Lans only loved once!"

Lan Zhan did not deign to reply, standing to leave with their hands still clasped together. But Wei Wuxian's heart sank.

There would be rumors about Lan Zhan and Nie Xiaomeng now, less favorable than the inevitable ones from the few times they'd been seen together by disciples and ordinary folk. Rather than the hero befriending a clever disciple, it would be Hanguang-jun sully himself with a man far beneath him.

Again.

It wasn't in the plan to kill Su She fast enough to stop rumors from spreading. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

So he let his worry slip from his mind, pretending it was unimportant, and enjoyed all Lan Zhan had gifted to him.

Consciousness returned slowly, floating upwards through a thick, dark nothingness until Lan Wangji regained awareness of his limbs, weighing heavily into the mattress. He could have stayed in that state indefinitely, holding off the hangover that would descend as soon as he moved, if it weren't for the chill in the air, the blankets askew and his bare feet no longer tucked between Wei Ying's calves. He flung an arm out, intending to pull Wei Ying back to him, and found nothing.

It was not the first time he had woken alone since his reunion with Wei Ying, but it was the first time without Wei Ying telling him he had to leave.

Cracking open one eye, he saw from the light filtering through the window that it was not so early as his usual rising hour, but earlier than he usually rose after a night with Wei Ying. A stabbing pain in his brow made him close his eye again.

To his surprise, Wei Ying's voice filtered through the thin screen separating the bedroom from the sitting area. Lan Wangji had not expected him to be awake yet.

"Yes, yes, I got them" He was saying. "Sorry, Lan Zhan got drunk last night, and I forgot to call." There was a long pause before, "Yes, he *does* have me wrapped around his little finger, and I'm proud of it."

He also seemed to be speaking to someone else someone Lan Zhan could not quite hear at first. He opened his mouth, intending to announce himself and ask Wei Ying what a call was, and found his throat too dry. He swallowed convulsively, scrounging up a few drops of liquid to wet his throat, but a distinctly familiar feminine voice spoke before he could.

“Your sister was worried about you.”

“A-Qing.” A second woman said, gentle and placating. “A-Xian cannot be expected to call us in front of his drunk lover, and he called first thing this morning.”

Who living could be close enough to Wei Ying to call him that, he wondered, with a spark of jealousy.

Unintelligible grumbling was the first woman’s response.

He did not wish to betray Wei Ying’s trust, but — he needed to know. Were these Wei Ying’s mysterious allies, here?

Things between them would chance, if Lan Wangji knew the truth, but he had to believe they would change for the better.

Lan Wangji pushed down on the mattress, pushing himself gingerly into a seated position. Slowly, so as not to spark a wave of nausea he could not fight back down. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed, he could not help eavesdropping.

“Ah, Wen Qing, lighten up! We’re almost there. Not just with only Su She and Xiandu himself left to fill the conditions of my resurrection, but you too.” Wei Ying’s tone turned serious. “We’re so close to finding a way to get you both out.”

A hoarse, rough laugh came from the stone. “Unless you have a way that doesn’t depend on you having free range of movement through Koi Tower, no we don’t.”

Wen Qing? Wei Ying’s Wen Qing? She had been burned, her ashes scattered at Nightless City. Lan Wangji had not himself witnessed either event, but his brother had the latter.

He stood, swaying, a hand clapped over his mouth, his eyes clenched shut until spots stopped dancing in front of them.

“A-Qing.” A second woman’s voice, disapproving.

Wen Qing began to protest, “Yanli, I —”

“I believe in you both. No arguments.” The second person —Jiang Yanli? — interrupted. “We’ve been over this before.”

“Yes, Shijie.” Wei Ying sighed, but he did not hear the other woman speak.

“Now, what’s your plan for dealing with Su She?” Jiang Yanli, if it was she, asked. Her voice was calm, collected, every bit the woman raised for an environment where how long she survived depended on greater control than any Lan was expected to learn.

Lan Wangji would not put it past Wei Ying to resurrect his sister. He had always done more than could reasonably be expected of him to aid the Jiangs. Wei Ying had been so much like his youthful self, albeit just that much more settled, that much less likely to tug at his robes for attention.

Yet how was she *here*?

Finally, he managed to cross to the screen door, and open it a crack, blinking against the bright light from the open window.

No one was there, except Wei Ying, staring down at a stone in his hand.

The stone appeared to be glowing.

He blinked.

Still glowing.

Wei Ying shrugged, flippant, as though the stone could see him, and refused to give a straight answer. "Oh, you know. Terrorize him a bit. Murder."

"A-Xian." Jiang Yanli's soft voice came from the stone, its glow wavering to the rhythm of her voice. Lan Zhan had to admit it sounded like her.

Though his mind moved slow as molasses through the haze of his hangover, Lan Wangji drew a few conclusions.

First, Wei Ying had resurrected his beloved shijie.

Second, he invented a way to speak with others across a distance.

Lan Wangji believed those to be accomplishments within Wei Ying's capabilities.

Third, Wen Qing had survived as a prisoner of the Jin.

He accepted these conclusions easily as fact, but was surprised by the wave of pain not within his head, but in his heart.

That Wei Ying had not trusted him to know those most important to him had somehow, miraculously survived. That they, two who made up almost the entirety of his list of those with Wei Ying's best interests at heart, were his mysterious allies.

It hurt, more than he thought it would.

Though he had promised to wait until Wei Ying was ready to tell him, he could not make his frozen limbs unstick themselves to alert Wei Ying to his presence.

"I know, I know, he's a Sect Leader. I'll be careful." Wei Ying did not seem particularly inclined to be careful.

He never was.

Lan Wangji did not want to watch his Wei Ying take risks without him anymore.

Wei Ying would sleep with him and let him watch over his heart, but he did not trust him. Treated him as his lover, but not his ally. He still thought of Wei Ying as his zhiji, the only person who would ever know the whole of him, but Wei Ying did not seem to feel the same.

Wei Ying saw him as one to be protected, rather than stand at his side.

Would not trust him, unless Lan Wangji somehow showed him he could.

Shaking, he eased the door closed, and returned to sit on the bed.

Lan Wangji was not given to subterfuge, but because of that, Wei Ying would suspect it of him.

“Wei Ying?” He called out, as though he had just woken.

It took Wei Ying a moment to reply, presumably as he hid that tool he used to “call” people from a distance. “I’m here! I brought up a breakfast the innkeeper swears helps with hangovers.”

He entered, carrying a tray laden with a large bowl, several smaller, and a teapot.

Wei Ying was wearing very little in the way of clothing, he noticed now. He’d donned only his inner robe and left the tie partially undone. The sight, framed by rays of sunlight from the window, was a better hangover cure than anything on that plate.

Sticking out his lower lip, he held out his arms for Wei Ying. With an indulgent smile, Wei Ying set the tray on the ground, and moved to straddle his lap. He raised his hands to roam the expanse of Wei Ying’s chest, lowering his lips to his neck and pressed a chain of kisses to it. Wei Ying arched into his touch, squeezing his thighs in obvious enjoyment.

Lan Wangji’s hips jerked up without his permission, meeting an answering hardness.

And Wei Ying stopped.

Again.

He refused to look at Wei Ying, his shoulders hunched in frustration, as Wei Ying swung himself out of his lap, and brought him his breakfast.

Noting his tension, Wei Ying skimmed a light touch along his shoulders as he ate. “Your shoulder is feeling okay, right?”

“My shoulder is doing well, thank you.” He submitted to Wei Ying’s light probing, though he had never wished more than in that moment that Wei Ying would stop. His touch felt good, as always, his relaxation under the press of Wei Ying’s hands innate and unavoidable. It was not

that response he wanted to avoid, but that Wei Ying touched him because he worried, not out of desire.

He wasn't sure how much longer he could stand Wei Ying treating him like he was made of glass.

They were supposed to be equals, yet ever since Lan Wangji left him with his brother at Muxi Mountain, there had been something getting in the way. Wei Ying's demonic cultivation, his own inability to bend the rules — he refused to allow Wei Ying's guilt over an injury he'd learned to live with break them apart again.

He needed a way to show Wei Ying he was still capable. That his punishment had not left him fragile and broken.

"Is something wrong?" Wei Ying cupped his jaw and studied his face, worry etching itself deeper.

He leaned into Wei Ying's palm, closing his eyes to prevent giving himself away. "Nothing new."

Nothing new was wrong, but he had found a way to make things right between them.

Lan Xichen would be hard pressed to choose which of his fellow Sect Leaders was his least favorite to deal with. Since Nie Mingjue's death, or perhaps since the day Lan Xichen stood between his friend's sword and the man he loved, his only close ally in another sect had been A-Yao.

Generally, it mattered little. Gusu was populous and powerful, rich in resources, fully recovered from the burning of the Cloud Recesses. He himself was well-liked, among the other sect leaders, in demand for his ability to mediate conflicts without openly judging either party.

Zewu-jun always finds a way to help, they said, whether preventing an outbreak of violence between sects or sending his disciples on a night hunt to assist those of another sect without charge. They treated him like he would ascend tomorrow, and not like the flawed, unsatisfied, mourning man he was.

It was not entirely accurate that he did not judge. There was a very short list of sect leaders whose company he did not mind, and a long list of those he would never have spoken to, if not for the demands of politics. Politics demanded so very much of him.

He wondered often what it might have been like to be his own cousin, and have the freedom to choose whomever he wished for a spouse. He might have offered to escort A-Yao back to Qinghe, the day they first met, or asked him to stay a while. He might have married him on the spot at the end of the war, and become a sect leader's spouse instead of a sect leader far too young. Or they might have lived here in Gusu, a quiet life spent cultivating together as his cousin did with her wife.

But it was not to be.

He would never be anything but Zewu-jun. And unfortunately, he shared a border with Su Minshan.

Su Minshan was certainly high on the list of unpleasant sect leaders. For the betrayal and pain he had caused Wangji, and, selfishly, how close he was to A-Yao despite that. The way he was slowly poaching new disciples from Gusu Lan did not help. He had gotten his start by welcoming cultivators who did not meet the requirements of other sects for admittance, or had been cast out.

Now that he was more established, rumors abounded that anyone with the potential to cultivate a golden core and came to Su Minshan's Baiji Manor before Gusu would be allowed to learn advanced musical cultivation techniques. Su Minshan should not have known those techniques to begin with. Only masters were eligible to learn, and Su Minshan was not then and was not now a master of the guqin.

Yet Lan Xichen had witnessed him using those formerly secret techniques on a night hunt on the border between Gusu and Moling. Su Minshan had flaunted the techniques, knowing there was little Lan Xichen could say when there were no books missing from the forbidden room.

This was not the first time Sect Leader Su had attempted to press a claim that several towns on the Gusu side of the border by rights belonged to Moling. It was true that those lands had once belonged to Moling Su's predecessor, but they had not been absorbed in the war. Rather, they had been ceded as payment for a debt several decades earlier.

This had not stopped Su Minshan from pressing the issue.

"My answer has not changed." He said as he poured tea. Unwelcome guest or no, hospitality must be observed.

Lan Xichen did not, however, use his best blend.

Su Minshan drained his cup of his tea at leisure, as though Lan Xichen had all the time in the world. "I'm not here to talk about that little matter."

"You're not." He said flatly.

"That was the plan, but plans change." Su Minshan shrugged, looking expectantly at his empty cup.

"Do they." He said, unimpressed.

He picked up the pot to refill the cup, his own still untouched.

"Ah," Su Minshan drank it down immediately, without waiting for it to cool, or savoring the flavor. "Trust the Cloud Recesses to have good tea. Tell me, Zewu-jun. How close an eye have you kept on your brother lately?"



“My brother is free to do as he wishes.” As Su Minshan was free to believe this tea was high quality, and not one with an uncomplicated bouquet favored by children.

Su Minshan did not reply until Lan Xichen picked up the pot, and tilted it.

“Even if he’s carrying on with pretty boys instead of chasing down murderers?” The cup overflowed, and Lan Xichen quickly set the pot down before it could spill into his guest’s lap, grabbing a cloth to wipe up the mess. Despite the danger his robes were in, Su Minshan did not move to assist. “You have to admit it’s suspicious that the great Hanguang-jun has not caught one little demonic cultivator yet.”

“He has explained the challenges to me.” It was a struggle now, to maintain his placid smile, when what he wanted was to through this arrogant, traitorous exile out on his ass.

“Has he.” Su Minshan smiled, smug despite Lan Xichen’s trust in his brother. “Then has he explained what he was doing in my territory, shackled up with some Nie?”

Lan Xichen laughed. “Spreading unsubstantiated rumors will not win you Gusu’s territory. Wangji is loyal to a fault and his heart does not stray.”

Wangji had a type. So far, it had consisted of one man. Even if he proved the exception to the Lan rule, and loved more than once, a man of the Nie build would hardly catch his eye.

“I saw them myself. He’s very pretty, for a Nie. Slighter, but still tall. Has an easier laugh and no respect for authority. Sound familiar?”

It did. It sounded very familiar. But the person Su Minshan described was long dead, and though Wangji mourned even now, Lan Xichen was glad of it. Wei Wuxian could not hurt his baby brother anymore from beyond the grave, could not lead him away from his brother and into rebellion.

There was no one like Wei Wuxian. Wangji could not make the same mistake twice.

It was impossible.

“Please escort yourself from my territory immediately.” Lan Xichen said pleasantly.

The odious man departed quickly, having experienced the escort of Lan guards out of the Cloud Recesses more times than he would likely prefer.

Su Minshan had succeeded in one thing. Sewing seeds not of doubt, but of concern.

Jin Guangyao arrived in Moling with a full escort. Ordinarily, he would have insisted that Su Minshan come to Lanling, but the man claimed he had come into possession of critical information that could only be delivered in person, and dealt with in Moling.

He hoped his old ally was not wasting his time.

Moling Su’s residence, Baiji Manor, was built across a series of tributaries and canals not far from the Yangtze River. It was not unusual to find the bridges and waters bustling with

Moling's peasants going about their business. Disciples in Baiji Manor might commonly be found relaxing or cultivating under their own direction, as Su Minshan had shunned the rules of his original sect, even as he attempted to emulate its Second Jade.

Entering the manor, he was directed toward the sect leader's office.

No, the disciples did not know why the sect leader had not come to greet his guests. He had been seen entering the office early that morning, and had not exited since.

There was a locking ward set up on the door, but they were certain the sect leader would emerge to greet his invited guest.

*Incompetents*, he thought uncharitably, as he knocked on the door. Su Minshan might have done better to teach his disciples *some* discipline.

No answer came.

He knocked again.

Nothing.

Fear sparked within him, rapidly suppressed.

With a sense of foreboding, Jin Guangyao examined the ward locking the door. There was no silencing mechanism to be found. It was a more advanced ward, too, than he would have expected from Su Minshan, bearing the hallmarks of a talisman developed by the Yiling Patriarch.

He knew, then, that Su Minshan had not taken his warnings seriously enough.

Jin Guangyao sketched the counter talisman in the air, bracing himself against a blow back of warm wind. He sent in one of Su Minshan's disciples first, of course, preferring not to risk his own.

Surprisingly, the disciple did not trip any hidden traps and die gruesomely, but he did shriek in shock and horror at what he found.

The body of Su Minshan was slumped over his desk, run through with his own sword.

Subsequent investigation would find that he had been killed with another sword before he had a chance to do more than draw his own. Even with the humiliating replacement of his murderer's sword with his own, it was a surprisingly clean death for Xue Yang.

His spirit was already gone, whether forced to move on, eliminated, or stolen for purposes of demonic cultivation, it was impossible to tell.

Jin Guangyao had his guesses.

The image before him seared itself onto the back of Jin Guangyao's eyelids, something inside him twisted irrevocably. Until Xue Yang was apprehended, he would not sleep again, unless

Erge was with him.

It was not fear that drove him to this decision. He could not let it be fear, controlling his breath to stop it coming too quickly as he ordered the disciples into action. It was the logical solution.

It was fortunate his core had now advanced enough to limit his need for sleep.

Anger, though. Anger he could allow himself to feel, so long as nothing showed but a dimpled smile. Anger had driven him for as long as he could remember. This white-hot rage was simply a kind he had not been able to afford when he had nothing to his name but his own mind.

Now he had the power to back it up.

Wei Wuxian sat on the rooftop, stroking the seventh scar on his bared forearm as he waited.

He had already checked with Nie Huaisang. In unusually plain terms, he had disavowed any knowledge of an alternate plan. It would have been so much easier to deal with if Nie Huaisang had gone and done away with their problem early. Nie Huaisang was shifty, had never been entirely trustworthy. A certain degree of improvisation could be expected.

But this...

He did not know how to deal with this.

Getting up, he walked across the inn's rooftop, and around its courtyard, repeating until he circled back to where he started. Abruptly, he ran out of steam.

Swinging himself down off the roof, he faltered, as he spotted Lan Zhan entering the inn. When he entered, feet first, through the window, he quickly arranged himself to sprawl across the windowsill.

Lan Zhan walked in, and stopped abruptly in the doorway at his expression.

"One of my marks disappeared today." Wei Wuxian said, shaking with something that might have been anger, and might have been horror. "Lan Zhan. What did you *do*?"

## Chapter End Notes

Su She gets one chapter, and one chapter *only*

I'm gonna make wangxian talk about their feelings don't worry! And Wen Ning will be here next time!

I'm on track (actually a little ahead) with nano, so it won't take too long! Probably Sunday again

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

It's still Sunday in North America\*!

\*I am on vacation and not currently in North America

If anyone knows what the tiny vertical flute Wen Qing plays is called 🙏

**CW:** Discussion of sex/fantasizing, jgy's temper again

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wei Wuxian waited for a response that never came.

Lan Zhan's eyes were glued to his arm, trembling as he reached out to take it, fingers tracing the scarred slashes, skirting the one remaining wound. "There's only one left."

"Did I not tell — shit." He swiped the arm Lan Zhan didn't have in a death grip down his face. "Su She distracted me, I'm sorry. But you killed him, didn't you? How did you even know about him?"

"I heard you. The morning after he taunted us," Lan Zhan said, a little absent, still more focused on his arm than that Wei Wuxian was genuinely mad *at* him, for perhaps the first time ever.

He had been frustrated, worried, taken his anger at the world out on him, who least deserved it among all cultivators, but he had never been angry like this.

He closed his eyes tight and said, "What the fuck, Lan Zhan!"

Lan Zhan turned wide, sad eyes on him, his lips pursing into a pout. The effect made Wei Wuxian wish to give him whatever he wanted, even if that was stealing all the stars from the sky. None of them could compare to Lan Zhan's beauty anyway.

But he couldn't give in. Not today.

Even if it drove Lan Zhan away.

"Your sect has a rule. Do not eavesdrop. Sounds pretty simple to me." As soon as the words left him, he saw how cruel it was to use the rules of Gusu Lan against Lan Zhan as he wilted into himself.

"It was unintentional." Lan Zhan whispered.

And okay, it hadn't been his brightest idea to talk in the next room when he *knew* Lan Zhan was an early riser. He'd thought it would be all right because Lan Zhan had been sleeping so late, by his standards, but he should have known.

Maybe part of him — all right, a lot of him — wanted Lan Zhan to know the truth, even as he knew it would hurt him.

Even so, he never would have expected him to react like *this*.

*The Yiling Patriarch* was the one known for spontaneous murder sprees. Not *Hanguang-jun*.

“Then you just... what? Waited a few days until he was back home? Left without a word so I had no idea what happened until my arm started burning? What the fuck, Lan Zhan. You said you trusted me!”

And that, really, was the sticking point.

Lan Zhan could wake up one day and decide he wanted to behead all of the sect leaders one by one, and Wei Wuxian would forgive him. So long as he had a chance to spirit Jiang Cheng away first.

Nie Huaisang, of course, was fully capable of saving himself.

What bothered him was that Lan Zhan had promised to trust his reasons, then not only eavesdropped, but not talked to him about it.

They were supposed to be better than that this time.

“You didn't trust *me*.” Lan Zhan stuck his chin out stubbornly, eyes blazing, and Wei Wuxian was more than a little mad at himself for still finding angry Lan Zhan hot.

“What?”

“Your sister and Wen Qing. Why did you not tell me?” With each word, the anger in his expression slid a little more towards hurt.

“I couldn't ask you to hurt your brother!” The thing was, Wei Wuxian *had* explained that part. He couldn't tell Lan Zhan about his ‘ally’ because of the grief Shijie had set in Zewu-jun's path. Asking Lan Zhan to lie to his brother was too much.

Now he supposed he had to.

Lan Zhan's stiffened, his brows drawing together. It seemed Lan Zhan's memory wasn't perfect after all.

“Your brother. He's sleeping with Jin Guangyao, who killed, well.... A lot of people.” Technically including Wei Wuxian himself, albeit obliquely. “He's the last one on the list.”

“I know.”

‘You... know?’

“You said, the morning I eavesdropped.” He looked down, and Wei Wuxian realized Lan Zhan still hadn’t let go of his arm, his thumbs rubbing over the latest scar. “I have warned Xiongzhong about Jin Guangyao before. As did Nie Mingjue, before his death. He did not listen.”

He grimaced. “Oh, um. Jin Guangyao killed Nie Mingjue.”

Lan Zhan’s hands tightened convulsively around his arm.

Wei Wuxian was still a little angry, but he was all right with being Lan Zhan’s comfort squeeze toy, while he filled in the gaps he’d left to fester.

But Lan Zhan let go suddenly, and turned to leave. “I must tell Xiongzhong—”

Apparently, he’d entirely missed the point.

“You can’t!” Wei Wuxian pulled Lan Zhan back by the shoulder, but when he winced at the pressure, immediately let go. “You can’t.”

“My brother is sleeping with a murderer.” He produced Bichen just to use it as a replacement for Wei Wuxian’s arm.

“So are you!” He yelled. Only to realize he wasn’t certain if they still were. Maybe Lan Zhan needed time. “Were you.”

Lan Zhan had still accepted his advances while he was bidding his time in those days before Su She’s return to Moling, but how could he be sure?

“*You* did not kill my friend.” Lan Zhan insisted.

And then, almost inaudibly. “Were?”

“No, I just killed hundreds of other people.” Wei Wuxian snarled.

And then, softer, “Are, if you still want me.”

Lan Zhan dropped his sword to pull him close, and Wei Wuxian collapsed into his arms, sending them entangled to the floor. He extracted himself enough to sit up, and pulled Lan Zhan close.

It was a strange position to have an argument, but it felt less like he was drowning. Lan Zhan seemed to feel the same, clinging to him even as he contradicted him. “I helped. They were attacking you. *Xiongzhong* is sleeping with a man who is manipulating him. I need to tell him.”

“You can’t. Shijie is the reason—” That was perhaps a bombshell he should be more careful in dropping. But ugh, Wei Wuxian *hated* explaining himself. “It’s time I told you the whole story.”

Lan Zhan was silent, as Wei Wuxian spoke, never once looking at him until he trailed off into silence, but he also didn't pull away. He remained silent for a long while after.

Until, "I will not tell Xiongzhong."

"I really didn't want to ask that of you."

"It was always my decision to make, Wei Ying. You are correct that he cannot know yet." Lan Zhan turned into him, dropping his head to his neck, and mumbled into it. "I don't like it."

If there was, ever so briefly, a wetness against his skin, Wei Wuxian just petted Lan Zhan's hair, hoping against hope this would not ruin things between them.

"Wen Qing taught you how to treat me." Lan Zhan said eventually, raising his head and finally, finally meeting his eyes.

Weakly, he attempted to joke. "She isn't the best doctor in the cultivation world for nothing."

Lan Zhan frowned. "I am still angry with you."

Yeah, that checked out. "For not telling you?"

"For treating me like an invalid."

"Lan Zhan..."

Wei Wuxian had never suspected he felt that way. He'd thought — he'd thought they were courting, learning each other the way they should have long ago. Lan Zhan brought him presents, he massaged away Lan Zhan's pain.

"No, listen." Lan Zhan said. "I am not going to break."

"I..." Wei Wuxian knew what that tone meant, but he was not very good at shutting up.

Lan Zhan drew back slightly, visibly stealing himself. "I want you to treat me like you used to."

"I... I see." He did not see.

Pulling at the ribbons hanging from Lan Zhan's robes? Dragging him headfirst into trouble?

Pretending they were nothing to each other?

Wei Wuxian could never do that again.

The answer, it turned out, was none of those. "Perhaps I cannot spar with you in rooftops at present, but I would like you to treat me as though I can."

Lan Zhan blushed, the tips of his ears turning red.



“Oh. *Oh*. ” He wanted that as badly as Lan Zhan seemed to.

He wasn’t sure he could.

“Do my limitations make it impossible for you to see me as your zhiji?”

He panicked, and it was his turn to use Lan Zhan as a squeeze toy. “*No!* Never.”

“Then why?” Misery overtook every facet of his expression.

This... really mattered to Lan Zhan. Wei Wuxian had been hurting him this entire time when all they wanted was the same thing.

Still, he didn’t know how to give him what he needed. Because the truth was, every time he looked at Lan Zhan, he was scared he was going to break him all over again.

“I can read entire sentences in your expressions, yet somehow I missed this.” The least he could do was try to explain. “It’s all my fault, Lan Zhan! You tried to help *me*, and this happened to you! I can’t let it happen again!”

“It was my choice.”

Lan Zhan seemed very fond of that refrain lately.

“You didn’t tell me to go to Nightless City, or help the Wens, or turn to demonic cultivation or — or give up my core! You wouldn’t have had that choice to *make* if I hadn’t broken all your rules and invaded your space and annoyed you into tolerating me. And then hurt you over and over again.” He threw up his arms, letting go of Lan Zhan entirely.

Despite his outburst, Lan Zhan only clung to him harder. “You gave up you *core*?”

“Um.” Fuck.

“Wei *Ying*.” There were tears in Lan Zhan’s eyes again, and he hated it, hated making Lan Zhan cry. He never wanted to see Lan Zhan cry again unless they were tears of joy.

“Jiang Cheng needed it more.” “You’re going to say no he didn’t. But Lan Zhan, he was going to die. And I couldn’t — I’m his older brother. I couldn’t let that happen, when there was something I could do. Maybe you still disagree, but. If helping me was your choice, this was my choice.”

Lan Zhan held onto his wrist tight enough he would leave imprints in his skin, needing the reassurance of Wei Wuxian’s spiritual energy under his fingertips. Wei Wuxian felt it pulsing in time with Lan Zhan’s own and thought, for the first time since a tender, open wound turned to stiff raised skin, that maybe he wasn’t going to lose anything tonight.

Maybe he was going to gain something instead.

“You’re right. I should have told you, and let you make your own decision whether to help.” Admitting that was like speaking through a mouthful of sand. “Talk about repeating my

mistakes, huh?”

“You’re right as well. I should have told you how I felt.” Lan Zhan looked no more pleased to say so than Wei Wuxian had been. “I apologize if I have caused you to alter your plans.

“At least he can’t go around spreading rumors about you and my lovely alter ego anymore.” Wei Wuxian was very practiced at looking on the bright side, even if this meant there were no more murders for Xue Yang to commit until Shijie was ready to bring the sects down on Jin Guangyao’s head. Nie Huaisang would figure something out, he supposed. “So. Now you know. Do you still want to help?”

“You’ll involve me in your plans?” Lan Zhan stared at him like the sun, and Wei Wuxian knew, so long as he tried, he was forgiven. As always, Lan Zhan forgave him too much, too quickly. “I acted rashly, today. I understand if —”

He raised his hands to Lan Zhan’s cheeks, and smushed them, making him glare at him again. This time fondly, so all was right in the world. “I’m tired of keeping secrets from you. I do trust you, it was never about that. But I need to trust you to know your limits, too. Neither of us are very good at that. But — I think there’s something that only you can do.”

“Whatever you need from me.” Lan Zhan promised, too quickly.

Wei Wuxian sighed. “See, that’s what I’m talking about!”

Lan Zhan was unrepentant. “I suspect it is too soon to ask you to spar, but will you do practice with me?”

“I would love to.” If it weren’t the middle of the night, he would drag Lan Zhan out to the courtyard and put him through his paces right that second.

Then, “Will you have sex with me?”

Uh? “We’re already having sex.”

“Yes, but. More.” Lan Zhan mumbled, bright red in the ears.

“You’re so brazen about doing things to me but you still can’t talk about these things.” He laughed. “Do you want to fuck me? Me to fuck you?”

He was teasing, but Lan Zhan took his question seriously. “Both. Perhaps consecutively. I have been waiting a very long time. ”

“I want that too. But not tonight.” Appealing as that sounded, as much as he wanted to leap into bed with Lan Zhan right that second, he didn’t want their first time with penetration to be make-up sex. They’d fallen into sleeping together, and he wanted their first time being the closest they physically could to be romantic and bright with laughter.

Besides, there were other reasons too. “I’m not really in the mood after this, and please don’t hate me for saying this, but that’s going to be a lot more vigorous than what we’ve been doing. Wen Qing expressly warned me to be careful.”

“Careful does not mean forbidden.” Lan Zhan pointed out, a naughtiness in his tone that came very close to making Wei Wuxian throw reason out the window.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, as usual, you’re right. I never thought anyone would accuse me of an abundance of caution.” His Lan Zhan had turned into such a rulebreaker. “I think I know where I can get some information on what’s safe, assuming you don’t want us to be limited to like, me riding you or taking you on your stomach.”

He’d enjoy anything with Lan Zhan — riding him sounded very appealing, actually, something about Lan Zhan watching him pleasure himself — but Lan Zhan obviously wanted variety.

“Those do not sound unappealing, but I would prefer to be less limited, yes.” Lan Zhan thought for a moment, and grimaced. “Please do not tell Nie Huaisang about our sex life.”

Thankfully, that was unnecessary. He’d have to talk to Nie Huaisang about the Su She problem, but there were other ways to dig up sex advice.

“If I stop by the Unclean Realm, a whole section of the library is porn. He has this shelf of technical books, I bet there’s one that lists out the best positions for back pain.”

Lan Zhan’s eyes went lidded. “After that trip, you do not need to be anywhere until Jiang Yanli is ready to move, correct?”

Oh, okay, Lan Zhan was determined to kill him by sex marathon. “Lan Zhan! If you’re about to suggest we hole up and —”

Lan Zhan placed a finger over his lips. “Would you like to meet A-Yuan?”

His thoughts dried up. A-Yuan must have grown so well, with Lan Zhan to guide him. The smartest, best, kindest boy in all of Gusu. He wanted to meet him.

But, “I don’t think it would be a good idea to visit the Cloud Recesses.”

Lan Zhan shook his head. “He is staying with my cousin in Caiyi. We could get a room at the inn, the one we stayed in together on the night hunt, and spend time with him during the day.

It sounded like a wonderful dream. “Ask me one more time.”

Lan Zhan knew which question without asking. “Come to Gusu with me?”

The realization that she was in love with Wen Qing dawned on Jiang Yanli quietly, and all at once. It took a long time to arrive at all, by which time a comfortable warmth had made a home in her heart.

Jiang Yanli had often heard Wen Qing described as cold, but with her, she’d always been warm.

“A-Li,” Wen Qing said one evening, “I promise the sect will still be there in the morning if you sleep.”

“Are you going to make me?”

“If I was there, I could.” “It’s too bad Wei Wuxian still hasn’t brought me that flute he promised.”

“You could sing me a lullaby.”

“Go to sleep, A-Li.” She said, “You flirt too much when you’re tired.”

And just like that, Jiang Yanli knew. She *had* been flirting, perhaps as far back as autumn.

She had been ignoring the signs. Or perhaps she had not known falling in love could feel like this. A slow, gentle slide rather than the disorienting back and forth and mixed signals that had characterized her engagement.

Loving her A-Xuan had hurt, until it didn’t, and then finally hurt again.

Perhaps she did not have to stop loving the man she had lost to find love again. Perhaps her heart had weathered more of those six years than she remembered.

Perhaps her heart moved at its own pace and what mattered was what she felt, and not an arbitrary amount of time for it to heal.

She did not know if Wen Qing felt the same, not for certain. But the long, intimate conversations, the hesitant looks and fleeting touches on the rare occasions she saw her, the way she haltingly called her A-Li as though uncertain it was permitted.

It seemed like she was, however hesitantly, flirting back.

Jin Guangyao was out of Koi Tower, called away on urgent business only the day before. Which meant she was free to visit Wen Qing.

Stowing away the Speaking Stone, Jiang Yanli climbed out of bed, only bothering to pull on a cloak over her sleeping robes, and took to the rooftops. The tiles were cold enough to chill through her slippers in an instant, but dry. A silent specter, she leapt gaps between roofs in a single stride, as she’d never been able to do in her original body.

Disciples who spotted her would be more likely to think the ghost of a conquest of Jin sect leaders past had infiltrated the tower than to imagine their sect leader’s wife was running across the rooftops.

On one of the other few visits to Wen Qing she’d dared without A-Xian, with Qin Su as a lookout, she *had* been spotted. There were rumors going around that the lover of Jin Guangshan’s father had been pushed down the stairs by a jealous wife and she still roamed the rooftops seeking revenge.

The wards around Koi Tower were not as strong as those around Gusu and its wards focused on individual residences, because the magistrates of Lanling's larger population were required to visit Koi Tower to deal with complaints and ordinary matters. Gusu Lan kept an office in the city, currently run by some cousin of the main line.

"A-Li," Wen Qing looked up from her books, when Jiang Yanli appeared in the window, exasperated but unsurprised. Jiang Yanli loved that expression. It made her want to tease her with compliments until she flushed with pleasure. "I thought you might come by. I made tea."

She sank to the ground at Wen Qing's side, closer than propriety allowed. Wen Qing's eyes widened, but she said nothing in protest.

Wen Qing, she had learned, responded best to frankness. She accepted the tea Wen Qing poured for her and held it close, letting the heat warm her fingers as it cooled. "Thank you, A-Qing," she said, and this time made sure to watch her reaction.

She looked away, distancing herself, so Jiang Yanli reached, very slowly, to cover Wen Qing's hand in her own. "Once, there was a young girl born to a royal family. Her talents in the tradition of her clan were spotted early, and so she had already begun to learn her parents' secrets when they were killed –"

"Stop." Wen Qing's nails dug into the table.

"It was going to be a pretty story about a princess, not you."

Wen Qing rolled her eyes, and Jiang Yanli smiled. "Let me skip ahead."

"Fine."

The girl, now a grown *princess* found herself locked into an inescapable prison." "Another woman came along and captured her heart by flirting too much. But that was all right, for she won her freedom in the end, and they lived on together, through good days and bad."

"It wasn't flirting that caught my eye. It was your determination." Wen Qing corrected her, the urge to be right driving her to spill a secret she immediately tried to take back, clamping her mouth shut as soon as the admission escaped.

It was too late to go back, and Jiang Yanli had no wish to. A giddy excitement grew in her chest, and she could not help teasing, "But I did catch your eye."

"I was very impressed with you, those days in Yiling." Wen Qing admitted.

"Yet you still agreed to drug me and send me away in a carriage," She pointed out.

"I didn't really know you then."

"I think you might have." Jiang Yanli could likely have talked A-Xian down, after all. Convinced them to put her little core into a body with the ability to develop it. "You're just as stubborn as A-Xian, and he convinced you the core transfer was the right thing to do."

“Most days I’m not sure whether I regret it or not.”

“We all have those moments.” Rushing out of Koi Tower unprotected onto a battlefield was one of hers. If she hadn’t, perhaps she would have gone the way of poor Jin Rusong once she grew used to her grief and dedicated herself to improving the lot of ordinary civilians, stealing attention from Jin Guangyao. Or perhaps Lan Wangji might have talked A-Xian down from the precipice, and neither of them would have died.

The former seemed more likely.

“And when you met me again?”

She took Wen Qing off guard.

“You looked like a drowned cat and then that same cat decided to make bread on my lap for weeks straight.” There was something huffy yet pleased in the way Wen Qing spoke.

That, Jiang Yanli decided, was promising. “What would you say if I asked to kiss you?”

“I-” Wen Qing began, and Jiang Yanli downed the whole of her tea in one gulp, letting a few drops slip down her chin.

With dazed eyes, Wen Qing reached out to wipe a stray droplet of tea from her lips, a yes escaping almost against her will.

Wen Qing worried at her lower lip, already bitten and scabbed from habit. Jiang Yanli was seized with the desire to sooth it with her own.

So she did.

Lightly, there and gone. A press of her lips and a teasing sweep of her tongue and she drew back.

Wen Qing flushed prettily all over, but Jiang Yanli was glad she had not taken more. There was still an uncertainty there she somehow felt certain had nothing to do with Jiang Yanli herself. “This — your body —”

A reasonable concern if that was what truly worried Wen Qing. But a concern long settled.

“Is mine to do as I wish,” Jiang Yanli said, “I was given permission long before I knew how I feel about you. Qin Su was insistent.”

*If you want to be intimate with someone, I won’t mind.* Qin Su had said out of the blue one evening months earlier. *Just try not to tell me about it.*

Jiang Yanli had pushed her off, thinking intimacy would not be a concern then, now, or even after their plan was complete. She would have a responsibility to rebuild the Jin Sect before her son was of age to inherit. There would be little time to court, and even fewer people she might learn to trust.

*You never know. It's easier to tell what someone's feeling when you experience their feelings half the time.*

That was true — if Jiang Yanli had not been able to feel the truth in Qin Su's words, she would likely have believed Qin Su was just saying that. But what she felt was largely detached, like sex was just an act to be performed for her, or perhaps like it no longer mattered, because she no longer thought of the body she had given Jiang Yanli as hers.

The process was irreversible, A-Xian had insisted, so she thought Qin Su deserved another chance of her own.

She was still mourning, Jiang Yanli had told Qin Su then. It would be years before she found someone who made her feel like her A-Xuan had, if she ever did.

Jiang Yanli had not been wrong, exactly. The way Wen Qing made her feel was entirely different. Not like she was replacing A-Xuan, but adding something new, something immeasurably valuable.

She was grateful now, that she didn't have to discuss matters with Qin Su now, when she had a particular interest in learning the noises Wen Qing could make.

"I can't." She insisted, her eyes screwing shut as she gave a pained exhale.

Jiang Yanli leaned into Wen Qing's space, close enough to watch her eyes dilate, but far enough that she was not caging her in. Giving Wen Qing another reason to feel trapped was the last thing she wanted. "You don't want me?"

Wen Qing shivered, her fists twisting in her robes, lips parted as she stared back at Jiang Yanli. "You can't want me."

"You don't get to decide that. You get to decide whether I have you," She sat back on her heels. "Or not."

Grasping at the Jiang Yanli's collar, Wen Qing flung herself forward, covering her lips messily with her own.

Jiang Yanli wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling them flush against each other, her other hand reaching up to cup Wen Qing's jaw.

Leaning back on her heels, Wen Qing climbed into her lap, winding her hands around her neck, the movement of her lips rapidly becoming practiced, yet she was holding back, her sides stiff under Jiang Yanli's hands.

She reached for the pins that held Wen Qing's hair together, so unnecessary in this space where she was rarely seen by any. Jiang Yanli wanted to see her uninhibited, gasping and loud, unafraid to ask for what she wanted. A cascade of strands, fraying at the ends from lack of care, a little rough, but clean. As she carded her fingers through the strands, rubbing against her scalp, Wen Qing softened under her touch.

Her arms unwound from Jiang Yanli's neck, swept over her shoulders, and landed on her waist. Jiang Yanli shifted, adjusting Wen Qing so she could grind on her pelvis, if she so desired.

Wen Qing surprised her, tracing the firmer, fuller lines of her waist, up over her rib cage, to cup her breasts through the fabric. She squeezed, experimentally, and Jiang Yanli picked her too-light, too-thin body up, and deposited her on her back.

She could not have done that, in her own body. A thrill of power went through her as Wen Qing drew her back to her lips. Jiang Yanli was contemplating pulling on the ties of Wen Qing's robe, seeing how much of her she might let Jiang Yanli touch, when a talisman burst into flames in Wen Qing's robes.

"Hide." Wen Qing said. "No time for the window, get under the bed, quickly."

As Wen Qing frantically mussed her bed to make her dishevelment look like sleep and hid the second cup, Jiang Yanli rolled under the bed, pulling the bedsheets askew to cover the area under the bed. Her heartbeat was so loud in her ears she was afraid she would give them away.

The mattress dipped over her, Wen Qing settling into place just in time for footsteps to storm in.

"Who are you working with?" Jin Guangyao demanded. "If not Xue Yang, has Qin Su found her way here?"

Wen Qing swung her legs over the side of the bed and kicked a stray hairpin underneath. "You keep asking me the same thing, like I haven't been alone in here for years."

"Did you intend to kill me with the tonic's side effects?" He demanded next. "Too bad it's not working."

"I couldn't know what the long-term effects would be. I have little reason to strive for immortality, in here."

Jin Guangyao shoved the teapot off the table, shattering it, but said no more.

"He's gone." Wen Qing said, a few minutes later, and it felt like all the progress she'd made, with Wen Qing warm and pliant in her arms, had been erased.

Jiang Yanli pulled herself out from under the bed, and sat up. "What did he mean, about your tonic?"

"I'm just glad he's still using it." Wen Qing said, which was not an explanation. "The smart thing would have been to stop after two months, when he'd seen some results but would have begun to notice some side effects."

Jiang Yanli's hands flew up to cover her mouth. "What did you do?"

She shrugged. "I gave him what he wanted, and let him ruin himself with it."



Suddenly, she understood why Wen Qing had been so reluctant to admit her feelings when Jiang Yanli was serving her heart up on a silver platter. She had never intended to survive.

Well too bad. Jiang Yanli refused to watch someone she loved throw their life away ever again.

“You can’t come here again.” Wen Qing said, unaware of the contrasting spin of Jiang Yanli’s thoughts.

“Fine, for now.” She agreed, stilted and furious. “Your safety matters to me.”

Wen Qing looked away.

“I’m not letting you die, do you understand me?” Jiang Yanli snapped. “You’ve given up too much already. We’re getting you and your brother out, no alternative.”

“Sometimes what we want is impossible.” Wen Qing did not seem to realize that was the worst thing she could say.

She turned away, hiding a rare sneer just like her brothers’. “I’m a Jiang. We don’t know what that means.”

She told Wen Qing to the one person who could stop it.

A-Xian.

The dungeons continued to be haunted and crawling with resentment. It reached towards Qin Su in curious tendrils, grasping but never quite touching. It reached for Wen Ning, too, and left him in equal measure. Almost like a cycle, sustaining him in this cursed suspension, without even the sun on his face or the sanctity of his own mind.

Which made it strange that there were a pair of dead zones in his head, stagnant pools of resentful energy. They did not feel like part of him.

Qin Su did not have the hands to examine the back of his head, but she did not need to.

These felt similar to Wei Wuxian’s inventions, where he had engraved talismans into metal and stone, but far more crude, wrapped in resentful energy almost like a stopgap to achieve its purpose. All that would need to be done to destroy their power was yank them out.

Easy enough, for someone with hands.

But Qin Su perhaps, did not need them.

Qin Su could see resentful energy, could reach out and touch it if she focused. It curled around her claws like an old friend. It had only recently occurred to her to attempt to use it. The idea went so far against everything she had been taught, that she still panicked at the thought of it.

If she could use resentful energy, that would mean she was nothing more than a lingering resentful spirit possessing her own body. Though she had told herself the same many times over, Qin Su had always felt an underlying, irrational hope that the Yiling Patriarch would recover his powers, turn to her, and say she was not one of his.

It was always the version of the Yiling Patriarch who had filled her teenage nightmares in those imaginings, not the playful, caring, and mercurial Wei Wuxian she was coming to know.

Still, she did not want to face the truth.

All it would take was to reach out and pull, and she would know.

Qin Su looked down at the body curled up on the floor, and saw not an undead monster, but a boy who happened to be undead. The black veins were no longer the stuff of nightmares, when she could see the resentment had brought back the boy and not a demon. And if only she got rid of the interfering energy, he would be that boy again. Perhaps finally have a chance to grow into a man, a chance her son never had.

She was the only one who could do this.

The resentful energy under her command wound itself around the posts. She pulled — and lost her grip. But she had felt it. She tried again, pulling the ropes of resentment tighter. This time, the long, sharp objects in the back of Wen Ning's skull moved outward, just the slightest bit.

But that bit let her feel the shape of their making, and sink her own energy inside.

*Get out of him*, she told it, and two nails shot from the back of his skull and embedded in the wall with a loud thunk.

The change was immediate, as the boy unjustly called the Ghost General began to stir. His eyes opened, and Wen Ning blinked up at an owl with a paperman clasped in its beak.

Asking the owl to stay, to which it gave a hesitant impression of agreement, Qin Su leaped into the paperman, and leaped up into the limited range of Wen Ning's view. She landed on the floor covered in old straw.

“W-w-Wei-gongzi?” Wen Ning stumbled over the name, his voice cracked from disuse, exacerbating a natural hesitance.

<No.> She said. <It's a long story, but I know him.>

His eyes narrowed in suspicion at the sound of her unfamiliar voice. “You weren't in the burial mounds with us.”

<Call me an accidental student of his.> Wei Wuxian had not intentionally taught her anything, but it was his array that had made Qin Su what she was.

But that only made him more suspicious. “Wei-gongzi did not take students.”

<I'm a bit of a unique case. You see, I don't have a body of my own anymore.>

"You're not a resentful spirit." He said, bemused. "My body would be trying to use you as fuel."

<It's a long story others can explain better than me, but I'll do my best. I'm sorry, you can't leave yet, there's a curse.>

"What happens if I try to leave?"

<It's connected in a pair — the person on the other end dies. Let me see your wrist. I need to see if your curse mark is the same as your sister's.>

"Jie? She's alive?" Wen Ning brightened, filled with hope.

<Oh, sweetie. They didn't tell you.> It didn't surprise her, after how she'd found him. <I suppose they thought the nails would be enough Wen Qing is as much a prisoner as you are, but from the looks of it, you've been left alone for a while.>

Wen Ning blinked at her, and finally, chains rattling, dragged himself up to a seated position. Reaching out a hand for her to step into, he brought her up to eye level, where the chains fell back on his wrist just far enough for her to take a peek.

The characters began to swim into nonsense immediately, sensing her despite her lack of physical eyes. She scolded them with a poke, reflexively hitting a point in the pattern that caused them to freeze and solidify.

Qin Su hadn't known she could do that.

Inspecting the characters, she tried to commit them to memory. She would not be able to replicate the pattern from memory, word for word, in the time she dared risk here, but if she could repeat the trick on Wen Qing's curse mark, she would be able to tell if they were the same.

But Qin Su had overestimated the time she had.

"Dasao?" A youthful voice called down the hall. "Are you down here? Please, you shouldn't be here."

<Pretend you're still unconscious!> She plastered her paper self to Wen Ning's hand, and he tried to do as she'd ordered, but the chains dragged against the ground. Wen Ning moved too slowly, not yet used to being able to move at all.

Mo Xuanyu appeared in the doorway, and met Wen Ning's eyes, his jaw dropping in shock. The owl flew for Mo Xuanyu's head, and when he ducked, kept flying, leaving Qin Su stranded with a barely conscious fierce corpse, and her little brother.

"You're awake?" A wide grin spread across his face, not unlike that Wei Wuxian wore when he was tinkering.

Wen Ning just stared back at him.

“Yao-gege said that was impossible! I always wanted to meet you.” He cleared his throat.  
“This one is Mo Xuanyu.”

Wen Ning continued to stare.

“Are you all right? How did you wake up anyway?” Mo Xuanyu unlocked the prison cell door, and stepped inside.

Wen Ning flinched, and Qin Su fell to the ground. She let out a sound of shock, though paper could feel no pain.

“Dasao, what are you doing in that paperman?” Mo Xuanyu asked, recognizing the sound of her voice.

She swore aloud.

“Dasao!” He was scandalized, looking back and forth between her and Wen Ning, visibly putting together far too many of the correct pieces. “Yao-gege will be so mad if he finds out. I don’t want you to —”

She interrupted him. <Xuanyu. Your brother has done worse things than you know.>

“It’s not like I don’t *know*.” He was strangely hurt, by the assumption. “It’s not like I can do anything about it! He’s Yao-gege! The Chief Cultivator! He stood up for me to our father!”

<That doesn’t give him permission to do whatever he wants to you.> Just because Jin Guangyao thought it was his right to do whatever he could get away with to people did not mean he was *correct*.

Wen Ning finally found his voice, still scratchy but stronger. “Your Dasao is correct. There is fraternal loyalty, and there is doing the right thing.”

Ignoring the content of Wen Ning’s words, Mo Xuanyu swung back to delighted.

“You can speak! I want to talk to you about a lot of things, Wen-gongzi, but first my Dasao should go back to her body.” He turned towards her, where she’d been edging towards the exit to the cell.

“I can give you a ride back to your body.” He plucked her off the ground before she could dart out of the way, pinching her flat sides between two fingers, alternating between excitement over Wen Ning and worry about her having found the dungeon and laboratory all the way out of the secret tunnel.

He did not seem to see the head of Nie Mingjue as they passed.

Qin Su look another glance at the alcove, and saw it was warded the same way as the house where Wen Qing was kept. It didn’t surprise her that Jin Guangyao kept secrets from everyone.

So long as Jiang Yanli was in their room, the rest of her secrets would be safe.

Her luck that night proved abysmal. They ran into Jiang Yanli, tousled and upset, at the exit to the Treasure Room.

#### Chapter End Notes

The extra length to this chapter is because Wangxian insisted on resolving their argument now instead of next time, and Yanqing insisted they're arguing now instead. "The characters write themselves" in action, I guess!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Summary

Mo Xuanyu learns some things, Wen Qing gets a taste of her own lectures, and Wei Wuxian meets his son

## Chapter Notes

I'm actually a few chapters ahead in writing now, oops? I've passed 50 k for nano, but I try to do at least 1667 words every day of November and didn't have time to edit/post too.

I will also reply to comments in early December! Thanks so much for those! <3

**CW:** mentions of past abuse, discussion of sacrificial tendencies

Jiang Yanli knew Qin Su was close by, as she returned to her rooms. Running into her was not a complete surprise, but running into her caught in Mo Xuanyu's grasp made her freeze in place.

Qin Su's paperman went limp, and she shifted herself back into Jiang Yanli, but it was too late. Mo Xuanyu had witnessed Qin Su apart from her body, and her body that should be lying abandoned in a meditative pose coming back from an obvious midnight tryst.

Thankfully, Jiang Yanli had learned early that nothing good ever came of panic, and had managed to steer Mo Xuanyu into her private sitting room while he was still in shock. She placed her usual talisman on the door to prevent eavesdropping, and took as dignified as she could under the circumstances. In her nightclothes, covered only by a wrinkled cloak, receiving company was entirely inappropriate. To make it worse, her hair was mussed, her lips swollen, and Mo Xuanyu likely did not know of Jin Guangyao's early return.

Then again, what was an affair compared to a seemingly possessed sister-in-law?

But how she was going to avert this disaster was anyone's guess.

“What do you think is happening?” She asked, moving on gut instinct. It wasn't infallible — in fact, the Jiang sect had a saying about how a Jiang disciple was as likely to get themselves into trouble when relying on their gut as out of it — but it was decisive. Jiang Yanli couldn't be decisive based on logic just then.

Mo Xuanyu paced back and forth across the length of the room, refusing to take a seat. “That was my Dasao in the paperman.”

*<I did kind of admit it>* Qin Su said, *<But only because he was already looking for me. Somehow, he knew I was down there.>*

Mo Xuanyu had been rather quick to jump to impossibility as an answer, rather than thinking some intruder might have pretended to be Qin Su for safety. “How could you tell?”

“I put a talisman on the secret entryways to recognize when someone came by. I was sleeping the first time it happened,” He explained, like making an alert talisman to identify intruders was casually done. While Jiang Yanli did not know the full contents of A-Xian’s notes, she thought that wasn’t one of his, and Qin Su hadn’t come across one in her reading. When this was over, assuming they were successful, Jiang Yanli was going to stick him in an explosion-proofed workshop with A-Xian and see what happened. “I wanted to know if Xue Yang broke back in and tell him apart from Yao-gege and —”

He clammed up, realizing he was exposing sensitive information to an unknown.

“You wanted to know how often Jin Guangyao was checking up on you.” She finished for him. It wasn’t a stretch. Mo Xuanyu was too politically savvy not to know Jin Guangyao would turn on him eventually. “Would this be easier if you could talk to Qin Su? She could go back in the paperman.”

He nodded, placing a slightly crinkled paperman on the table, and folding his arms across his chest.

Reluctantly, Qin Su slipped back out of her head. The paperman struggled to its feet and waved. *<Xuanyu. This is a voluntary possession that doesn’t actually count as a possession.>*

“I have no idea what that means.” Mo Xuanyu stared at her, utterly perplexed.

*<I summoned her into my body. You may be familiar with the array.>* Qin Su was reluctant to explain her situation.

“No, I haven’t seen anything like that yet. Is it one of the Yiling Patriarch’s? I’m a few transcribed notebooks back, they can take a long time to replicate correctly.”

That was confirmation Jin Guangyao intended to do away with Wen Qing sooner rather than later.

“Wait,” Mo Xuanyu narrowed his eyes. “When did this happen?”

*<...around midsummer last year>* Qin Su admitted.

He slumped. “So Dasao didn’t take a sudden interest in me. Whoever *you* are did. Who even are you anyway?”

“I can tell you that,” Jiang Yanli said. “If you promise not to tell Jin Guangyao.”

<You should listen to her> Qin Su said <She's usually right>

Mo Xuanyu had paused while speaking, but now he resumed his pacing. "You won't tell me who you are if I don't promise not to tell Yao-gege, but if I don't tell Yao-gege and he finds out I played a part in it, he'll send me straight back to Mo manor. I can't *do* that again."

Jiang Yanli thought Mo Xuanyu's fate would likely be worse than a shipment back to his mother's home if Jin Guangyao found out he knew about her.

"What will you do if I don't agree?" He demanded. "I've told Yao-gege about your plans before."

"So you have. I suppose you'd have to make a surprise trip to a friend of mine." Even before she had Qin Su's golden core, Jiang Yanli had known a few tricks to knock someone out. One of Nie Huaisang's spies could cart him off to Qinghe to wait it out. Maybe they could make it seem like Xue Yang had kidnapped him and use that to force a confrontation. Nie Huaisang would like that plan, she thought. "But I don't think you like the things Jin Guangyao has done any more than we do. I think you can be persuaded."

"You'd trust me?" Mo Xuanyu's voice was small and disbelieving.

She wouldn't, not really, but she would not want to lock away his free will when his choices had already been so limited. Qin Su liked that she could appreciate that time.

"I'll trust you," She agreed, though she could not afford to trust him with just anything without some sort of guarantee. "You're so very young, Xuanyu. And the paths you're on now? They're almost impossible to get off of if you don't have help."

Mo Xuanyu was reflecting on his own roles in Wen Ning's imprisonment, and at least one murder.

"All right." He agreed. "If Dasao promises that's all that will happen, I wouldn't mind a break from this place if I can't agree. Who are you?"

Would he even recognize her name, or would she just be poor murdered Jin Zixuan's dead wife? "You weren't entirely wrong to call me Dasao. It could be considered a more accurate title for me than Qin Su, in fact."

He frowned, and Qin Su decided to complicate things further. <That, and he should really be calling me jiejie. I've always wanted to be an older sister.>

"What?"

<What does it sound like?> Qin Su asked, with inevitable irony.

Mo Xuanyu blanched, the color draining from his face. He swallowed heavily, sank into a cross-legged seat, and did not ask whether Jin Guangyao knew. "What are you after Yao-gege for? Wei Wuxian killed your husband."



“Not exactly, ”Jiang Yanli told him the truth, to an extent. He did not need to know the details, just enough for him to know Wen Ning truly did not deserve what had happened to him. She told him too how Wen Ning and Wen Qing had saved their lives after the fall of Lotus Pier, and Wei Wuxian acted as the only one in a position to help.

She didn’t directly imply that she and A-Cheng had known of his plans before he rescued the Wen, but it wouldn’t be the worst thing if he interpreted it that way.

“Even if A-Xian had killed Zixuan by mistake, I wouldn’t have to give up my brother to mourn my husband. That’s not how hearts work.” If it was, none of this ever would have happened.

“Wen Ning was the weapon, but can he be blamed? Jin Guangyao subverted his free will to make him do it. If not for that risk of subversion, would he not have replicated the trick to ensure he had minions he could control?”

“I don’t understand.” He looked as though he might faint, more so than at Qin Su’s revelation. His heartbroken expression was devastating yet incomprehensible.

“Understand what?”

“You still love him even though he turned out to be different than you thought he was?” His voice cracked. Mo Xuanyu had never sounded so young.

Perhaps, before the horrors of the Sunshot Campaign, she would have had greater difficulty understanding A-Xian’s choices. Even then, she would have loved him all the same.

“Of course I do. What made you think I wouldn’t?”

“People like me because I’m a status symbol and a — and a flirt!” He had always seemed to enjoy flirting, but perhaps that was as much a mask as the one he wore. “But I’ve seen how they react to demonic cultivators, and I have no reason to believe they’d treat me any differently. They don’t even know what I look like! Luo Bo once joked that how pretty I was would be a wedding night surprise. Joke’s on him, I guess.”

Qin Su, whose parents had both loved her unconditionally, even if her mother kept secrets and her father doted on her more than knew her, and had a choice in who she married from the very beginning, did not quite get it.

*<You have a lot going for you, though. I’m sure plenty of young men would like a husband who can outwit them. I don’t know what makes you insecure about your looks, but plenty of people care more about personality.>*

“I don’t want to be liked for being mysterious and charming rather than for my own qualities, but I don’t have much choice.” Mo Xuanyu hesitantly removed his mask. “If I don’t get married... Yao-gege won’t want me around forever.”

*<That’s on him, not you>* Qin Su said, before Jiang Yanli could decide what to say.

The scar was deep, and had been poorly treated while it healed. A chunk of skin had been carved from his cheek where infection had likely set in, and

By the standards of cultivators, the scar was hardly anything. If A-Cheng won a scar like that in a night hunt, he would be praised for his rugged good looks, and be inundated with marriage offers he did not want, despite having intentionally scared away every matchmaker he'd ever met.

Before it had become obvious that A-Xian would not have anyone other than Lan Wangji, A-Cheng had wanted Wei Wuxian to marry one of their cousins who could give him children, and provide him with heirs as well as nephews. After the Sunshot Campaign, he'd just planned to appoint that cousin's first child as his heir.

But Mo Xuanyu was the sibling of a sect leader who could barely swing a sword — and an illegitimate one at that. Jiang Yanli knew what it was like for her life's value to rely on marriageability. Jiang Yanli had been fortunate to be betrothed from birth, in comparison. She had only had to endure a few months of her mother's disdain, and then A-Cheng would have preferred she married a rogue cultivator and stayed forever, though it wouldn't have won the recovering Jiang any alliances. If A-Xuan hadn't come around, she likely would have.

If Mo Xuanyu couldn't rely on pretty, he had to be the most charming person in every room, someone with intriguing secrets just out of reach. Not just his value, but his life depended on it.

"Who did that to you?" She asked.

"It was only my cousin on the Mo side, playing around with a knife when we were young." He said dismissively, and that told her more than enough of the abuse he had suffered with the Mos, why he was so willing to bear the weight of Jin Guangyao's sins and risk body and soul in exchange for temporary safety.

"You know, A-Xian used to say men looked better with a few scars," Though she doubted he would say so now, after all Lan Wangji had suffered. She tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. "If I'm successful, you won't have to marry out, or marry at all unless you want to. You can be pretty and a little dangerous. Your boys will love it. And if they don't like *who* you are as well, then that's their loss."

He still looked doubtful, so she elaborated with a lesson it had taken her a very long time to learn. "If your value to him lies in your ability to make a marriage alliance or to make developments in demonic cultivation rather than who you are, that's not how you should treat family. My parents did that, and look how we turned out."

"The youngest successful sect leader in history, the inventor of a new discipline of cultivation, and a secret political reformer?" He asked.

<Two of them died> Qin Su pointed out.

Jiang Yanli frowned at her. It was true, but she could say it more delicately. "None of us could be considered well-adjusted."

He shrugged. "I would take poorly adjusted over locked in a shed and beaten."

Jiang Yanli doubted Mo Xuanyu would have taken any better to the streets or to her mother's punishments than A-Xian had, but she could allow him his delusions. Sometimes it helped to imagine how much better life would be if your childhood had just been differently terrible.

"You don't have to worry." He continued, and she startled at the change of subject. "I won't tell Yao-gege right now, but I don't know if I can help you yet. I'm going to talk to Wen Ning more, and we'll see."

"That's all I ask." Jiang Yanli patted his shoulder with a motherly tone and kindly did not remind him that he had already promised almost exactly the same thing.

It was a relief that he agreed, even if it would have been an easy way out. She would prefer to have Xuanyu as an ally for now, and show him what being cared for felt like after Jin Guangyao was gone. His ability to trust her would be damaged, likely irreparably, if she kidnapped him.

After Mo Xuanyu left, she retrieved her Speaking Stone from its habitual case, and went through the steps of calling Nie Huaisang and her brother. Now that Su She was dead, and Mo Xuanyu knew, perhaps it was time to move up their timetable.

"A little bird told me you're trying to get yourself killed." Wei Wuxian climbed through the window with Qin Su in a crow on his shoulder. "A little bird makes it sound like it was Nie Huaisang. I mean Shijie, let's be clear."

Wen Qing turned a page of her book without looking at him. "Good, you're here. Don't forget while you're off playing doctor that you have healing left to do."

In proof that he had no sense of self-preservation, Wei Wuxian waited until he had a back full of needles to confront Wen Qing over her idiocy.

Qin Su and her newfound powers of resentful energy manipulation were across the room, reading one of his notebooks in the hope of better understanding her abilities. She had to turn the pages delicately with her beak, but it was a vast improvement on moving down the page paragraph by paragraph and getting knocked to the ground by a gust of wind every time she tried to turn the page or having to read at the same time as Shijie.

"You know," he said, "When I noticed you and Shijie looking at each other like you had a secret, I thought you were probably the only person I'd approve of for her. I'm rethinking that."

Wen Qing stopped pushing in a needle just as it pierced his skin.

It was working. Good.

"Wen Qing wouldn't toy with her heart like Jin Zixuan did, I thought. She would never. And yet."

"I'm trying not to break her heart." She said forcefully, as she removed the needle and pushed it in with her usual careful efficacy.

"How many times do we have to tell you we're saving you both? No other option, got it?" Wei Wuxian would accept no other outcome.

He had just gotten back from telling Nie Huaisang what Lan Zhan had done in person, and he was not in the mood for bullshit. Nie Huaisang was scary when he was forced to change his plans. Or well, he was scary always, but especially then. He went cold and focused, and strung together leaps in logic that no one should ever make.

When he was done, Wei Wuxian told him as much, and Nie Huaisang turned around and said. "Wei-xiong, aren't you the same?"

Inventions were obviously different than plotting public disgrace and execution, but Nie Huaisang would not be swayed. Wei Wuxian was kind of pissed off about it.

"You and your sister sound strangely alike sometimes." Wen Qing said. sleep of the exhausted, worn out from clinging to the shreds of her sanity. "It's just not possible."

"I have a solution for playing the other end, now that Qin Su's found Wen Ning." "Lan Zhan can do it while I'm in the middle of whatever Shijie and Nie Huaisang decide our confrontation of Jin Guangyao will look like."

"I didn't think you would find a solution at first, but I'm not sure how much longer Jin Guangyao will consider me useful. Or until what I did to him causes him to kill me in a rage."

"We already told Huaisang that we need to move faster." The plan had been going so well before, it only made sense that they'd walked blindly into a series of comedic blunders.

He could not see Wen Qing roll her eyes, but he felt it in his soul. "I can't believe you're the one trying to reason with me."

"You're the one who knocked me out and ran off to die, when you weren't even the one they wanted." He pointed out.

"He wanted you and the A-Ning, I know." Wen Qing sounded dejected, truly hopeless, and he thought those six years of isolation at the hands of an enemy, the life of her only remaining family dependent on her good behavior, might feel something like the Burial Mounds, when he first got to them. But you'd given so much up for us already--"

"We shouldn't dwell on might have beens." If he'd known A-Yuan was alive, if, if, he'd lose himself in a spiral of what ifs if he continued down that train of thought.

He'd just realized he'd always wanted to tell Wen Qing off a little over that. Even if it made him a hypocrite.

If they were going to be self-sacrificing idiots, they could have at least been self-sacrificing idiots together.

"It's done. But you don't have to repeat the same mistake. Now isn't over yet."

"Do you promise you're not going to turn around and sacrifice yourself again?" He wasn't offended, because he would absolutely have done such a thing, especially fresh from the Burial Mounds.

But he wasn't fresh from the Burial Mounds anymore.

"Not on purpose. Shijie went through so much trouble to bring me back, and Lan Zhan --" He flushed, just at the thought of him, and wasn't even embarrassed about it. "I'm going to marry him, and raise our son, and fulfill a promise we made ten years ago."

"Now go tell Shijie you were being an idiot and want to comb her hair for the rest of your lives or eternity, whichever comes first." He teased.

"You're ridiculous." Wen Qing said flatly. "I'm not saying anything of the sort."

"In case you haven't noticed, Shijie is a ridiculous romantic. If you're going to grovel at her feet, you should at least put an effort into making sure your apology fits her taste."

Wen Qing grimaced. "I'll tell her. But I'm not doing it in front of you."

"She'll tell me if you don't!" He warned.

"I'm aware."

"The faster you get these needles out of me, the faster I can look at your curse mark and get back to my lover. Which means I'll stop telling you what to do with yours."

Wen Qing removed the needles very slowly, just to make a point, though this time she didn't contract that Shijie was her lover. Wei Wuxian teased her about Shijie all the while. Qin Su tapped on Wen Qing's curse mark just to the left of center. She stiffened.

"Is that painful?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"It's... hot." She bit down on the inside of her cheek. "Like melted wax, but not easing up."

"Let me know if it gets worse," He said, and proceeded to twist her arm this way and that to examine every character giving Qin Su no time to compare to her memory of Wen Ning's.

Once he was done frowning at her skin, Wei Wuxian sketched down every character so she could watch the shape of an array taking form.

Qin Su inspected each character meticulously. *<It's the same.>*

Jin Guangyao wrote curses the same way he ruled: intricately detailed and with no allowance for error. There were no mistakes in the array itself, to be sure. Every radical was in place, not a single stroke too long or too short. He had even worked in means of notifying him if the array was triggered without making himself part of it.

Intricacy, though, had its limits. It was more difficult to power arrays within a person than etched on stone to be triggered by an event. By necessity, arrays in living people had to be constantly active, and unless powered by another source — such as a sacrifice — and still rarely lasted longer than a year. Jin Guangyao had been maintaining it for six.

If the wad had just been formed, the only thing to do would be to smash through it with demonic cultivation on both ends, quickly enough the backlash did not have time to strike. In those six years, though, cracks had formed through which the right music could pick it apart.

“Yes, as I thought. I could break this, but it’ll be easier with Lan Zhan’s help.” He gestured at Qin Su to let the array start moving again and Wen Qing relaxed with a sigh of relief.

“I don’t want help from your boyfriend.” She grumbled.

He patted her arm. “Too bad, you’re getting help from my Lan Zhan.”

Doctors were truly the worst patients.

A-Yuan and Jingyi were attending to their guqin practice when Lan Wangji and Wei Ying arrived together. They’d met on a mountain near Caiyi, and Wei Ying almost immediately informed him he had found exactly what he was looking for in Qinghe.

It was Lan Wangji’s own fault that he had to wait. He had promised their son he would be right back, and Wei Ying too was so excited about meeting A-Yuan, quickening his pace and looking back, then slowing to Lan Wangji’s. Forgetting, for just a second, that Lan Wangji was still recovering.

Notes wafted on the air around Qiaohui-tangjie’s house, clever young fingers plucking life into the air itself. Mistakes were not infrequent, usually as result of Jingyi’s experimentation with tempo and flourishes.

Lan Sizhui, of course, was the picture of precision. His teachers liked to say he was a genius of the like not seen since before their Second Jade met Wei Wuxian. But he laughed at Jingyi’s antics, and played the straight-laced disciple even as Jingyi raised questions about art and whether it disrespected composers to give his own spin on the piece.

Their styles melded together well, no matter how the elders disagreed.

“Hello,” A-Yuan said. “Are you one of Fuqin’s friends?”

“You could say that,” Wei Ying agreed. They always would be friends first, though Lan Wangji was uncertain anything he had done recently could be seen as the sort of friendship A-Yuan meant.

He hoped one day soon A-Yuan would look at Wei Ying and see not his father’s friend, but another father.

While Lan Qiaohui and Fang Xiaorong were all too happy to have the boys off their hands for a few hours while Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian took them around town, the boys reacted differently to time with Wei-gege, as Wei Ying attempted to earn their attention. A difficult feat even for him, for A-Yuan was wary of this man Lan Wangji had brought home.

He worried too much about his lonely father. And too, he kept startling at the sound of Wei Ying's voice, squinting at him and shaking his head dismissively. Something must be familiar about him, from the vague impression he retained of his earliest memories.

Wei Ying managed it, of course. By joining in on their music lessons and encouraging Jingyi to be himself, he convinced A-Yuan to give him a chance.

Lan Wangji merely watched, silenced by the weight of years' worth of fantasies coming true before his eyes.

"Why don't you want to visit the Cloud Recesses, Nie-qianbei?" Jingyi asked innocently.

"Hmm." Wei Ying tapped his chin. "What would you say if you were practicing for a recital or exam and the neighbors complained you were too loud?"

Are they correct? Do we sound bad?" A-Yuan asked, anxious at the thought, though Lan Wangji had not heard of any complaints.

"Not at all!" Wei Ying patted him on the head. A-Yuan relaxed, and looked surprised he had done so. "They think you're loud because they don't have an appreciation for music. They don't know what they're talking about. How might you fix that?"

"Play more quietly together, so they do not get irritated while we're learning the piece, then perhaps the neighbors will come around over time." A-Yuan said.

"Exactly, many people treat me like unfamiliar music." Wei Ying said.

"That's a stupid metaphor." Jingyi said, and moved on.

But A-Yuan trailed off, contemplative. "I see..."

"You sound excellent with a very difficult piece. They should listen more, and perhaps they would have new material to experience and more constructive feedback to help you get even better. Now!" Wei Ying slapped his crossed thighs. "Gusu won't teach you everything. Would you like to learn a fascinating technique?"

Wei Ying was soon buried in toys, tools, and miscellaneous objects that somehow turned into a cacophony of enthusiastic sound that *might* have been considered music, if Jingyi had not been shouting at the top of his lungs, and Wei Ying had not been banging on an improvised drum composed of an empty barrel and a pan at exactly the wrong times to disrupt any beat the boys attempted to maintain.

It was highly possible they *would* get a complaint from the neighbors out of this.

But Wei Ying was the happiest he'd ever seen, frequently grinning at him with a raised brow that dared Lan Wangji to stop him.

And A-Yuan was participating. *His son*, who tried so hard to emulate his reserved father's mannerisms out of some sense he needed to prove himself to the elders for Lan Wangji's sake, laughed every time Wei Ying got him off beat. Eventually, he struck the set of empty jars in front of him with his pair of sticks without a care in the world.

Jingyi, of course, needed no encouragement to participate.

They were still fooling around when Qiaohui-tangjie and Fang Xiaorong returned.

Watching Wei Ying with their son made his heart sing. He thought, perhaps, when the song to tear apart Jin Guangyao's curse on the Wen siblings was complete, a new composition might be in order.

He played a jaunty little tune on his dizi, and got Jingyi to try to spin off of it. After a while, A-Yuan even joined in, shyly offering a light, dancing slide of notes up to the peak, and down the descent.

Jingyi cheered him on loudly and offered gushing praise before Wei Ying could get a word in edgewise.

When Jingyi finally let him get a word in, Wei Ying ruffled A-Yuan's hair. "An excellent attempt for a first try."

A-Yuan frowned, disbelieving. "What do you really think?"

"I really think it was an excellent attempt!" Wei Ying insisted. "You could work on the spontaneity, but Jingyi still needs to work on maintaining his technique along with his inspiration."

When his cousin and her wife returned, Qiaohui-tangjie pulled him aside before Wei Ying noticed their presence.

"How did you find him?" Qiaohui-tangjie asked.

"He came to me," Both the first time and the last time, Wei Ying came to him. The times Lan Zhan sought out Wei Ying first had never gone well.

She hummed, and resumed watching them quietly.

"You do not intend to ask me more?"

Xiongzhong would have — he would want to know everything about the man who had managed to steal Lan Wangji's heart from Wei Ying, and pry until Lan Wangji either let something slip, or stormed away.

Shufu would have as well — he would pry until he found something wrong with anyone Lan Wangji expressed interest in, because no one could be good enough for his baby nephew.



And also, because he trusted Lan Wangji's judgment in everything from sect matters to adopted sons, but not in romance.

Qiaohui-tangjie did not even turn to look at him as she said, "You've been in mourning for so long. You look like a weight's been lifted. He seems to adore you. That's enough for me."

Despite her laxer relationship with the rules, Qiaohui-tangjie was far better at minding her own business than the current crop of elders.

"Thank you, Tangjie."

"Don't get me wrong, A-Rong and I are still going to explain how his body will never be found if he hurts you." She laughed at her own joke, but Lan Wangji found nothing funny about it.

His breath froze in his lungs, the world receding around him until he forced himself back into focus. "Please don't joke about that."

"Of course. That was wrong of me." She waited for his breathing to return to normal to continue, mentioning nothing of it. If Lan Wangji must have his moments of weakness, he preferred them to be acknowledged by no one other than Wei Ying. He suspected Qiaohui-tangjie felt the same, after their upbringing.

It was not a bad thing to have laws, or guidelines for how to live a virtuous life. But the way punishments were inflicted for even minor, first infractions, and snitching on infringements met with praise, made it difficult to confide in anyone. When a Lan found someone to confide in, they often married them - or if the interest was not romantic, became lifelong, inseparable friends.

Wei Ying's attempted defense of him after the drinking incident and made up tale of a fish after the Lan Yi incident had made him his first choice.

"What *can* I threaten him with?" Qiaohui-tangjie asked, after a sufficient amount of time had passed.

Lan Wangji considered.

"Needles. Or boredom." He said.

"Nie Xiaomeng!" Qiaohui-tangjie called. "If you hurt Lan Zhan, you'll have to listen to Elder Liu recite the rules for the next century."

He could not be certain if Qiaohui-tangjie suspected, or merely believed Lan Wangji was capable of exercising his own judgment in taking a lover — unlike anyone else in his family. Either way, it was proof he was correct to entrust Sizhui's safety to her. She might even be on his side when the truth of Wei Ying was revealed.

# Chapter 20

## Chapter Summary

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji continue to take a break from the plot and Nie Huaisang's spies disciples have been busy

## Chapter Notes

Canada let me back in so I'm no longer on vacation. I was really exhausting myself the last few days of my trip (in a good way) so while I meant to post this a few days ago, I fell asleep instead. But here it is now!

CW light implied vers smut between "Lan Zhan grabbed his wrist" and "Despite Wei Wuxian's warning", mention of self-neglect and past child-death.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wei Wuxian was relived when Lan Zhan's cousin did not even attempt to invite them to stay. He would have loved to stay with A-Yuan, of course, but the prospect of retreating to the guest rooms across the courtyard after the boys had gone to bed, having to bear the happy couple's knowing gaze...

Thankfully, there was a lecture happening in the Cloud Recesses that afternoon before dinner, and A-Yuan and Jingyi were required to attend. He was able to slink off with Lan Zhan, and pretend they were being polite.

Unfortunately, as the inn was frequently used by guest disciples, and even local junior disciples were teenagers, it had experienced significant disruption from intersect drama and petty disagreements. Since he had last been there, it had put in place a policy against taking meals to one's rooms, so they had to find elsewhere to eat first.

Lan Zhan claimed he would need the energy.

There had been a food fight over grades and class rankings last summer, apparently, after the guest disciples' classes had become more hands on. The old man wanted to shore up the survival skills of disciples from smaller sects, after the war.

Wei Wuxian would have loved if that was the sort of drama he had to deal with during his time as a guest disciple. He would have been a target of course, along with Lan Zhan. They could have bonded over absolutely destroying everyone else together.

“You know I would not have participated,” Lan Zhan said, his eyes widening as a server passed by with an enormous bowl of mango pudding. Wei Wuxian called out to the server, and asked for a bowl for Lan Zhan.

The server set down the dish at its destination and rushed to bring them another, shyly and effusively expressing his thanks to Hanguang-jun for being Hanguang-jun.

Wei Wuxian took a spoonful and held it out to Lan Zhan, circling it in front of his lips. “You know you want it, I saw you looking.”

Rather than take the spoon, as expected, Lan Zhan leaned forward to close his lips around it. Startled, Wei Wuxian let go, leaving Lan Zhan with a spoon sticking out of his mouth.

So cute. So silly. Wei Wuxian imprinted the image in his mind so he could draw it later.

With an indignant huff, Lan Zhan ate the rest of the dessert under his own power, but still insisted that Wei Wuxian share it.

“Was it the very inn we’re staying at where Zewu-jun had us room together before we went to fight the waterborne abyss?” He asked.

Lan Zhan nodded, blushing at the memory.

“Oh, did Zewu-jun put us together on purpose?” Zewu-jun probably hated him now, but if he had once pushed Lan Zhan at Wei Wuxian’s obvious courting displays, perhaps the situation wasn’t entirely unsalvageable. And that flush spreading onto Lan Zhan’s cheeks was just too delicious. If Lan Zhan wanted to be teased less, he should be less edible.

Of course, Lan Zhan did not want to be teased less.

“He said he wanted us to be friends.” The corner of Lan Zhan’s mouth curved up at that. “I was very angry at him for knowing what I wanted.”

He and his brother had been so close to each other when they were younger. Wei Wuxian sometimes thought he was at fault for the difference now, but Lan Zhan said it had more to do with the demands of their positions, Lan Zhan’s own avoidance of politics, and Jin Guangyao.

The inclusion of Jin Guangyao made Wei Wuxian mostly believe him.

“Well, *I* was delighted until you ignored me all night.” His Lan Zhan had shown his shyness in such strange ways. Oddly enough, how often Lan Zhan checked in on his rule breaking had been the encouragement he needed to keep trying, because it meant Lan Zhan was paying attention to him.

“I will not ignore you tonight.” It was a promise, and the best kind of threat.

“You better not.” He scraped his finger along the inside of the dish, scooping up the remnants of their mango pudding, and bopped Lan Zhan on the nose, leaving a dollop behind. As Lan

Zhan blinked in wide-eyed surprise, he grinned. Lan Zhan's nose scrunched as he wiped his nose clean.

Adorable. His future husband was adorable.

Lan Zhan grabbed his wrist, and before Wei Wuxian could blink, licked a stripe of pudding off his fingers. His jaw dropped, and he stared, unable to believe that his Lan Zhan was just. Licking him. In public.

But Lan Zhan didn't stop there. Maintaining eye contact the entire time, he took Wei Wuxian's first two fingers into his mouth, tongue swirling around one after the other as he sucked them clean.

Wei Wuxian had always known Lan Zhan could be very single-minded. But he had underestimated the lengths this new, more shameless Lan Zhan would go to get what he wanted.

"We're done now." He gasped out. And he could have sworn that for just the slightest fraction of a second, Lan Zhan smirked.

Grabbing some money from his bag without looking, Lan Zhan left far too much silver on the table. Wei Wuxian did not bother to correct him, grabbing him by the hand and dragging him three doors down to the inn, and up the stairs to their room.

They stopped once outside, for Wei Wuxian to pull Lan Zhan close to kiss him, though he checked to make certain no one in Lan robes was nearby first.

A second time, on the first landing of the stairs, for Lan Zhan to push him against the wall and get him so hot and bothered he would have forgotten why he couldn't strip right then and there, if Lan Zhan hadn't pulled away first.

A third and final time against the door, where Wei Wuxian attempted to return the favor. Only for another patron — an actual Lan, forcing him to make sure Lan Zhan's face was covered — to pass them by, glaring.

Before the disciple could comment, Lan Zhan pulled the door open, and pulled him inside, slamming it shut. He warded it against disturbance using a talisman from Wei Wuxian's own pocket he hadn't noticed him steal.

"Did you find what you were looking for in Qinghe?" Lan Zhan asked, his hands pulling at Wei Wuxian's belt.

"So it turns out the position matters less for your back than that we mix it up." Wei Wuxian unloaded the contents of a qiankun bag on the bed, spring book after spring book falling into a pile.

Pausing in his attempts to strip him, Lan Zhan picked up a slim volume and paged through it, none of the shock and embarrassment he'd had the last time Wei Wuxian had given him an

erotic text remaining. Instead, he looked like he was taking mental notes. It really was only expressing himself aloud that Lan Zhan still struggled with.

Not that Wei Wuxian was any better in that respect — but hey, they were making progress.

“I did find some very interesting texts full of all sorts of things I’d like to do to you.” He hooked his chin over Lan Zhan’s shoulder, and wrapped his arms around his waist.

Lan Zhan threw the book back on the pile, turning in his arms.

“Only do to me?” Lan Zhan said like a challenge, and lowered his lips to the spot just below his ear.

“Lan Zhan, I like making you feel good. It.” He broke off as Lan Zhan began to suck with the perfect amount of pressure. “It’s very... ah, keep doing that.”

There was nothing he liked more than hearing Lan Zhan fall apart for him, knowing he had made him lose his composure and moan for him. It drove him crazy beyond all measure.

But this — anything Lan Zhan did to him, really — was right up there with it.

He found the contraption holding Lan Zhan’s guan together and deftly disassembled it in only three tries, sending Lan Zhan’s silky locks cascading down where Wei Wuxian could card his hands through them.

“If you still have that level of dexterity, I must improve my technique.”

“I volunteer my poor neck for your practice.” He pushed Lan Zhan’s hair out of his eyes, the better to stare into them with all the desire constantly aflame within him. “But didn’t we have plans for tonight?”

“They were very vague,” Lan Zhan said. “Have you come up with a more specific idea?”

“I think you should fuck me first, and then I get to have my way with you.” That was the best option, logically, so Lan Zhan could have all of what he wanted, even if his back pain spiked beyond the normal, ever-present levels that might never vanish completely early on.

Lan Zhan contemplated the suggestion. “I hope that does not mean just a massage.”

“Maybe for round three.” He teased, and promptly started wondering if there might be ways to better satisfy Lan Zhan during his massage, rather than after, when he was falling asleep.

“Round four.” Lan Zhan countered.

“Lan Zhan! You can’t just — bargain with me on this!” He sputtered. “What makes you think either of us can go that many rounds?”

He might have the golden core to help him recover, now, but that was still high expectations Lan Zhan had of him! Four rounds? What had Lan Zhan been doing to himself that made him so certain he could manage it?

Lan Zhan refused to say. Which only made Wei Wuxian more frustrated. "If I fall asleep on you, no complaining."

In answer, Lan Zhan plucked a jar of oil from his sleeve. "Why are you still dressed?"

Wei Wuxian stripped as quickly as he could. Naked and standing before Lan Zhan, he had never felt so exposed.

"Unfair," Wei Wuxian said, and undid Lan Zhan's belt before he could protest. He grabbed the open edges of his robes, and fell with him onto the bed.

Lan Zhan's weight on his torso was usually relaxing, a sign that he felt comfortable enough with Wei Wuxian to ditch his corpse like position and cuddle.

Not this time.

His legs spread automatically, and Lan Zhan fell between them. The feel of his enthusiasm encouraged Wei Wuxian to buck up against him, and Lan Zhan responded in kind.

Lan Zhan's mouth reattached to his neck and resumed turning him black and blue from jaw to collarbone. For someone who'd been so impatient for it, Lan Zhan sure was taking his time.

Clearly, Wei Wuxian would have to take matters into his own hands. Because now he was the desperate one. "Aren't you going to fuck me now?"

Lan Zhan let go of his collarbone to glare at him. "You're the one getting in the way of that."

Rather than let go of his robes, Wei Wuxian shoved them down over Lan Zhan's shoulders. "Am not."

Lan Zhan rolled his eyes in that metaphorical way of his, but did finally make use of that oil.

Then Wei Wuxian still stop him, his hands firm on Lan Zhan's shoulder, just as he was getting started. "I need to know you'll tell me if it gets too much."

"I will," Lan Zhan promised, and set to work, driving him to frustration. After far too much foreplay in Wei Wuxian's opinion, Lan Zhan knelt at the edge of the bed to fuck into him. Wei Wuxian had to tangle his fingers in Lan Zhan's hair to stop himself from grabbing onto his scarred shoulders.

He had been right, and Lan Zhan had been right.

Because after Lan Zhan blew his mind, collapsed onto him and declared Wei Wuxian would have to do the rest of the work.

But with breaks in between for cuddling, Wei Wuxian rambling on with Lan Zhan's hums and occasional thought-out responses for an answer, they made it about a dozen positions and several orgasms each into the early hours of the morning before Lan Zhan finally fell asleep under the press of his fingers.

"Let's ....'gain ...morrow," He mumbled almost incomprehensibly as he drifted off, and Wei Wuxian was left to giggle madly into his shoulder blades.

He had gotten in much more of a workout than Lan Zhan, who mostly just expressed whether or not he liked what Wei Wuxian was doing beginning with round two. But he wasn't exactly complaining at the thought of a repeat tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Whatever happened in the long run, Lan Zhan and A-Yuan and *their* family were his now. And like he'd told Wen Qing, he wasn't giving this up without a fight.

Despite Wei Wuxian's warning, it took Wen Qing the better part of a week to figure out how to apologize.

Wei Wuxian would, when he learned of their reconciliation, grouch at her with his typical good humor for taking so long.

But they had reconciled, and he had taken a decade to manage what Wen Qing had in less than a year, so who was really winning here?

(Him. It was him. He got to touch his lover, and if there was one thing she had been right about it was that Jiang Yanli's visits threatened everything they were working towards.)

In the moment, though, she thought this apology might be what finally did her in. Wen Qing had survived Wen Ruohan, the streets, the Burial Mounds, her own execution. She'd outlasted years of isolation with her mental faculties intact if not health, and that had hardly been in good shape to begin with.

Telling Jiang Yanli she loved her while admitting she was not okay was somehow more difficult because she had every expectation of coming out alive on the other end.

They didn't speak during that time, though her Speaking Stone lit up every day to let her know Jiang Yanli was there, and had not given up on her.

She didn't speak to anyone.

Not even Jin Guangyao, who chose then to leave her to stew in her misery.

She transcribed, and read, and stared into space — mostly stared into space, only falling asleep at her desk when she could no longer keep her eyes open.

She was just trying to get her courage up, Wen Qing told herself.

The days began to bleed together. Keeping the windows shut, her only measure of time was when a servant left meals outside the door that she barely touched.

She blinked awake blearily one morning, to find her cheek stuck to a page, stained with ink. The words on the page were smudged or nonsense, and Wen Qing could not remember writing them.

Her Speaking Stone was glowing on the table, where she'd left it.

With a sudden burst of energy, she got to her feet and opened the window.

Darkness greeted her.

She couldn't tell the time, whether she had been sleeping for a whole day, lost count of the days, or Jiang Yanli was calling her especially late.

That, Wen Qing knew as a doctor, was not a good sign.

She had been doing this to herself, letting herself fall back into her old habits like she was already anticipating the end. Wen Qing would have knocked some sense into any patient of hers who did this.

Staying on her feet, she picked up the stone.

"Wen Qing?" Jiang Yanli asked immediately. "Is that you?"

She closed her eyes, breathing in the sound of Jiang Yanli's voice, letting the damage she'd done to make Jiang Yanli — *A-Li* — call her by her full name again wash over her.

"Wen Qing?"

"I'm here." She forced out, finally. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

"I'm sorry for pushing you away." She paced back and forth in front of the open window, the night air clearing away the cobwebs that had clouded her mind.

Jiang Yanli was silent. That wasn't good enough, Wen Qing knew, she needed to do better. To be better, for A-Li and Wei Wuxian and her brother, even if she couldn't care for her own sake right then.

"I want to spend my life with you, but it's difficult to believe I have a life to share. I hurt you because I'm so — so —" all the words that came to mind were ones Jiang Yanli would not want to hear. "Because I thought it would be easier if you didn't care about me. See, this is why —"

Wen Qing stopped herself.

"As long as you don't finish that sentence, I'm inclined to accept your apology." A-Li said with so much care in her voice Wen Qing almost dared to call it love.



“And if I say I love you?” She held her breath. Though it was medically impossible, even her heart seemed to stop as she waited for A-Li to reply.

“That’s all I’ve been waiting for.” A-Li’s voice was a hug. And though she did not say it back right then, Wen Qing felt the words in her heart.

Love wasn’t everything, though. If she did live to set foot outside these walls — if Wei Wuxian succeeded in breaking the curse, and Jin Guangyao was deposed, and there were choices set in front of her, there were choices she could not make. “If I do make it out of here, I don’t think I can stay here. In Lanling.”

“Please stop saying if.” A-Li sounded as though her heart was breaking. “You should go with A-Xian and get to know your nephew.”

It meant everything that Yanli would allow Wen Qing her freedom, if she wanted it, but she knew she should not accept it. “That’s not the appropriate duties of a sect leader’s wife. Or should I say the Chief Cultivator’s wife?”

It was difficult to tease, but she liked the ways A-Li responded.

This time it was different. She got sweet, rather than teasing back. “I don’t want you to be a sect leader’s wife. I just want you.”

“The distance will be difficult.” She warned.

“We fell in love at a distance, didn’t we?” A-Li reminded her.

“A distance of a short walk.”

“And an impassible boundary.” A-Li retorted, and it felt like they were making their way back to equilibrium. That comfortable space that existed between them, like no other Wen Qing had experienced.

“You breached that boundary more than once.” Despite Wen Qing’s many warnings. The near miss with Jin Guangyao would hopefully keep her away for now, but they had better finish this soon. Wen Qing did not think Jiang Yanli was likely to stay away forever.

“Yes.” Yanli put on a haughty air. “I’m a Jiang.”

She startled a laugh out of Wen Qing.

More seriously, A-Li continued, “You deserve to have the world back. I’ll likely have to travel often. I can meet you anywhere but here, and I don’t plan to lead Lanling Jin forever.”

“You really intend to make this work.” She breathed out, closing her eyes.

“Of course.” A-Li said simply. “I love you.”

Wen Qing was certain it could not be that simple. Even able to speak across long distances like they were in the same room did not erase the desire for touch and the face of the woman

she loved. It was difficult enough now, when there was no other option, especially after learning the taste of her. Once they had the option, it would be far worse.

A-Li thought it would be worth it.

Wen Qing wanted to learn to believe that.

Nie Huaisang brought news of Mianmian's location himself. In typical fashion, he arrived unannounced, located Jin Guangyao — in the midst of a passive aggressive meeting with Jiang Yanli — and bodily threw himself at him. He cried great, gasping crocodile tears too loudly for anyone else to get a word in edgewise, much less find out what he was supposedly upset about for at least an hour.

Jiang Yanli made one or two perfunctory attempts to peel him off, before sitting back to drink her tea and enjoy the show with Qin Su. Jin Guangyao was shorter tempered with Nie Huaisang than usual, yet another sign of what Wen Qing had done to him.

*I should have picked up something was wrong earlier.* Qin Su said, but of course it was reasonable for her not to pay too close attention to the mannerisms of the man who had destroyed her life and murdered her son. How was she to guess Wen Qing had gone behind their backs to slowly poison him?

Jiang Yanli had forgiven Wen Qing, but she wasn't inclined to forget, no matter how happy Wen Qing made her.

It had, Nie Huaisang told Jiang Yanli in private, after she finally swept him off to “give A-Yao a break,” been altogether too long since he last inconvenienced Jin Guangyao with his emotions. If he let it go much longer without making an appearance, Jin Guangyao might start to suspect he was becoming competent.

<*We can't have that.*> Qin Su said.

“It would be intolerable. San-ge might get rid of our preferential import and export taxes or worse, realize I've been manipulating him all this time.” He shuddered dramatically, so often performative even with those who knew the truth, and turned to Jiang Yanli. “By the way, you're *glowing*. Did something happen? Romantically, perhaps. Anyone I know?”

Somehow, he knew, the nosy little man. “If you must know, yes. Wen Qing and I are...” She was unsure of the correct word. They weren't betrothed of course, with no official documents in place, but they weren't courting either. That was impossible, when Wen Qing had nothing to give. Lovers was perhaps most accurate, but that wasn't a word she could use to Nie Huaisang's face. It felt too slight. Wen Qing was more to her than her beauty, though of course she appreciated that too.

She felt more hurried now, for this to end, so she could appreciate Wen Qing more in person, as well as introduce her to her son. “...together. She makes me feel...”

Her cheeks warmed, and she could not find the words.

“Like a teenager in love, I see. Oh, for the day I find someone who can put up with me long enough to trick them into marriage.” Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, and his eyelashes.

“I told you, now no more spying on us.”

“What spies?”

Qin Su suddenly left her, and moments later Nie Huaisang’s songbird leaned through the bars of its cage to peck his hand. He yelped, glaring at her. “I know that was you, Qin Su. Goldie only bites other people, never me.”

But the bird only tilted its head, chittering at him. Qin Su had already returned to Jiang Yanli’s mind.

“And when I bring such important news, too!” Nie Huaisang lamented.

Jiang Yanli waited him out, and patted his shoulder when he slumped, and gave in. “The lovely Luo Qingyang has been found, and she’s agreed to a meeting.

Why he insisted on pretending she would break first mystified her.

*<It’s because you pat him on the shoulder. He craves being babied.>* Qin Su spoke aloud from her paperman, where Nie Huaisang could hear her. He didn’t disagree.

“She didn’t want to come all the way here of course, which puts us in something of a pickle since my new fourth disciple has run off to play house with Hanguang-jun.” He sighed mournfully, and clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. “Fortunately, my dear first disciple Nie Xiaodan is aware of our political schemes, though she wishes dearly that she wasn’t. Da-shijie will be very cross with me for a few weeks for telling her about this, because unlike Dage she *can* stay mad at me. But she can carry three on her saber and has reluctantly agreed to transport us to the meeting.”

“This meeting outside of the sect I’m expected to be here to run in the morning.” It was important that she meet Mianmian, but not important enough to vanish from her responsibilities without explanation.

“We’ll return before dawn,” Nie Huaisang explained. “Luo Qingyang agreed to meet at the border where Lanling, Gusu, and Fengyang meet. Close enough to go and return tonight, but far enough for her comfort.”

“Let me guess. You brought someone to pretend to be me.”

“They haven’t noticed anything wrong yet, have they?” He said slyly. “Everyone saw you guiding me off in one of my fits. It would take quite the emergency for someone be willing to intrude on you comforting me in case I go off on another of my drunken sprees.”

The drunken sprees that were not actually committed by him.

Jiang Yanli hated to admit that he was right. So, like the diplomatic sect leader's wife she was supposed to be, she agreed to his plan without acknowledging that answer.

What Jiang Yanli had failed to consider about riding the saber with Nie Xiaodan was that she would be pressed up against all those muscles to fit. Wen Qing would forgive her for enjoying it a little, after how the wind cut through her layers and left her shivering.

At least she wasn't Nie Huaisang, who was scooped up into Nie Xiaodan's arms and cradled like the baby he enjoyed pretending to be.

Nie Xiaodan set them down a short ways away from the meeting point, and took up residence on a tree trunk that had fallen during a storm.

Nie Huaisang complained the entire rest of the way about the way the wet soil would stain his shoes and the hem of his robes, cutting off only when they reached a clearing containing three carved border markers painted in blue for Gusu, gold flake for Lanling, and the newest in a cheery green for Fengyang.

Mianmian was not yet there, though they had arrived at the appointed hour.

"Is she here?"

*Qin Su, can you look around.* She asked, and a nearby sparrow took flight moments after Qin Su left her.

"I would bet she's nearby. Without a candle or water clock around, one can't be precise." Nie Huaisang said.

Though Jiang Yanli wasn't keen on standing in a forest clearing with no one but Nie Huaisang around for any length of time, though Nie Xiaodan was within earshot if they were attacked by more yaoguai, ghosts, or bandits than she could handle alone, Nie Huaisang undoubtedly had his Compass of Evil at hand.

She took the time to inquire about how much Mianmian knew. "You never said. Does she know who I am?"

Jiang Yanli did not have to wait long to find out.

"Do I know you're Jiang Yanli? I do now." Mianmian stepped out from behind a tree, standing taller with more confidence than in her youth, though her clothes were simple and plain. She held her sword at her side with an easy confidence, ready to draw it before she or Nie Huaisang could blink.

"It may have been implied in the letter my disciple gave her." Nie Huaisang admitted. "It was the only way to guarantee she would come. I could not, for example, ask her if she would like to meet her old friend's son."

Jiang Yanli grimaced in time with Mianmian. "Killing the messenger who sent me *that* invitation would have been self-defence."

Jiang Yanli wholeheartedly agreed. The circumstances leading up to her husband and A-Xian's deaths were well known.

"Jin Ling is doing well in Lotus Pier. He's on track to match his father and erjiu's pace in forming his golden core within his seventh year." Not quite as fast as A-Xian, but well on track to be in the top five of his generation.

A-Xian and Hanguang-jun had the sort of talent that came in pairs once a century, destined to become lovers, mortal enemies, or both, like Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi. She wanted her son to live a happy, fulfilling, prosperous life where his greatest concerns were what to do with the excess harvest and wooing the right spouse. The absence of a great destiny was perfectly acceptable. And in fact, preferred. "He takes after both of them."

Mianmian shook her head as some of the tension bled out of her. "Only Jiang Yanli would make that comparison with pride. That doesn't answer how you're alive, or what you want with me."

"You stood up for my brother once."

"Turned out well." Mianmian scoffed.

"Do you regret it?" She asked.

"Not for a moment."

"Your words could make a difference now." She sad.

"I left the cultivation world behind for a reason." Mianmian leaned back against the tree, crossing her arms over her chest. "And I did it before it killed my best friend. Why would I *ever* want to return?"

Jiang Yanli nodded sharply. "What I need from you is to talk to an old friend you left behind. But I won't pretend I'm not interested in persuading you to do more."

"I knew there would be more to it than the letter said. The sects will never change. I'm leaving." She turned to go, but stopped when Jiang Yanli called her back.

"The Cultivation World is already a very different place than when you left it. Lanling Jin is still the largest sect, but Qinghe has grown richer —"

"I have no idea how that happened," Nie Huaisang interjected. "And if anyone asks, it's not true."

"—and Yunmeng Jiang and some of the newer, smaller sects have the talent. Several of them have expressed a desire to put an end of their client status. An illegitimate son is Chief Cultivator. The old guard is almost gone, and what remains is a bunch of gossips, and two old men who prefer me. What better time for change?"

"That Chief Cultivator happens to be evil." Mianmian pointed out.

“Which is why we should improve on the reforms he’s done, rather than let them get torn apart by whoever comes next.” Though Jin Guangyao’s reforms were largely intended to help him accumulate power, they were still a start, and one on which Jiang Yanli had already made her mark.

“You want me to come back and be your what? First disciple?” She said with disdain.

But that was exactly what Mianmian should have been. “Yes, actually. The Jin have been missing a competent one for years, and the position was always supposed to be yours.”

Mianmian shook her head. “I’m not rejoining the cultivation world just to replace one Chief Cultivator with another.”

That was exactly the opening Jiang Yanli needed. She had yet to speak of her plans for *after* with anyone save Wen Qing, and a little with A-Xian, but Mianmian was exactly the person she needed at her side to make those plans a reality. She had one chance to convince her. “Is that what you think I’m doing?”

Mianmian paused, turning back to her. “I’m listening.”

Chapter End Notes

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Summary

Xue Yang-related rumors spread while Wangxian are still on vacation, Yanqing get a little steamy, and someone might have forgotten to be subtle

## Chapter Notes

I completely forgot last chapter that I previously had Jiang Yanli using Mianmian's nickname, so I've fixed that 😊

**CW:** Mentions of Wen Qing's ongoing mental health struggles, light f/f smut this time! (Between “You say that like it’s a secret.” and “Still don’t believe we’ll get you out?”), manipulation within a romantic relationship (xiyao, of course)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“I heard Xue Yang is terrorizing the Yao Sect.” Caiyi Town’s favorite breakfast bao vender said to a farmer, just setting up her produce stand.

“You heard wrong.” The farmer replied, deftly rescuing a cabbage from an ignominious fate in the mud.

“Well, *I* heard Jin Guangyao took him back into his bed, so now he’s taking out caravans on Yunmeng’s trade routes.” A rival farmer said snootily. Everyone in Caiyi Town knew he was still furious, decades later, that the first farmer had refused his proposal, purchased her own land with a group of friends, and never married. Even the cultivators of Gusu Lan, who did not gossip, but could not help what the overheard.

“That can’t be true. I heard Jiang-zongzhu hasn’t left Lotus Pier in months.” The bao vender said.

Wei Ying snickered into his ear as they walked down the road holding hands, low and breathy so A-Yuan and Jingyi, a few steps ahead, could not hear. “Jiang Cheng *definitely* hasn’t let Lotus Pier since Shijie dropped Jin Ling in his lap, but I *hope* he hears that one. Should I go tell that farmer that Xue Yang was last spotted a day’s journey away? No one will believe him.”

Though Lan Wangji was not fond of crowded bars, Wei Ying liked to go and hear the gossip. He would be willing to do so on occasion on the road.

After an hour or so, Wei Ying would notice him staring and say, “You’re bored, huh? Let’s go see if that position you wanted to try gets me as deep inside you as that spring book promised.”

Or perhaps he would gulp down a mouthful of Wei Ying’s drink, and let himself be shamelessly cuddled within an inch of his life, never more secure knowledge that he was loved.

But in his hometown, he was too easily recognized for espionage in bars to be productive, or comfortable. A day on the town made for a good compromise, and an activity they could do together with A-Yuan and his eternal tag-along.

As they rounded a corner, he kissed Wei Ying on the cheek. Wei Ying made a pleased-frustrated-delighted sound and turned pink, achieving Lan Wangji’s goal. But he also pulled him up short and pecked him on the lips just as Jingyi turned back to look at them, so they spent the next hour being peppered with questions by Jingyi about whether they’d married without inviting him.

Followed by how it was possible for them to kiss without being married.

With each question, Wei Ying laughed, and came up with more and more ridiculous answers. Some of which Lan Wangji ultimately had to set straight — after letting Jingyi ponder the implications out loud, and A-Yuan frown doubtfully.

Just so he wouldn’t have to answer to Qiaohui-tangjie and Fang Xiaorong about why Jingyi thought he was married to half his classmates because he had held hands with them once.

Wei Ying’s laughter sounded like the songs the people of Caiyi Town played during festivals. There were none being held then, but he brought the streets to life, darting between stalls and making conversation with the owners.

He cast a booth of Emperor’s smile a longing glance, but passed it by, instead catching Jingyi by the elbow and dragging him to follow A-Yuan into the bookstore. Lan Wangji was not in the habit of denying Wei Ying anything, so he doubled back and bought him a single jar.

One jar, because a single jar would not get Wei Ying drunk, and Lan Wangji intended to make use of every scrap of hand-eye coordination Wei Ying had to offer that night. Lan Wangji loved watching his hands when he played the dizi or twirled it between his fingers, but he was enamored of them when they were anywhere on him.

A-Yuan refused to ride on Wei Ying’s shoulders. It was, he said, outside the rules of the Cloud Recesses. His friend Jingyi took that as encouragement, so they went out to visit all the child-friendly locations in Caiyi Town with Jingyi crowing excitedly from his perch. Jingyi somehow ended up with four sticks of tanghulu, while Sizhui had two as he had less of a taste for sweets, and Lan Wangji found one mysteriously within his hands.

Wei Ying’s doing, of course, along with the small, thin wrapped present Wei Ying thought he had been fast enough to hide.



A-Yuan did hold Wei Ying's hand after that, along with Lan Wangji's, content to walk between them, getting the sticky candy residue all over their hands.

Lan Wangji ordinarily would have wiped off A-Yuan's fingers as soon as he noticed, but if he stopped him, A-Yuan might go back to walking ahead with Jingyi, and Wei Ying looked so very happy.

With one of his hands full, Lan Wangji could not effectively wipe the stickiness of his own mouth. So, when the drum tower rang the time for the boys to head up the mountain for their afternoon classes — Qiaohui-tangjie had gotten them out of morning exercises and theory-based classes for the time being, but not their intensive practical cultivation lessons, by claiming their advanced knowledge would be better enhanced by shadowing her than sitting through material they already knew — Wei Ying sucked on his lips until they were clean, but swollen red.

"The Jiang Sect is perfectly capable of running itself for a few weeks without its leaders." Jiang Yanli complained. "Maybe a few months. But if I left the Jin alone an entire week, the cousins would get into the treasury and bankrupt us all."

"They don't deserve you." Wen Qing said.

Qin Su was currently with Mo Xuanyu and Wen Ning, in the midst of one of their conversations on morality. Or power and resistance. Or whatever else Qin Su had decided Mo Xuanyu needed an education on.

"They don't. You're right." Jiang Yanli was under no illusion that the majority of the Jin relatives, the disciples trained under Jin Guangshan, or Jin Guangyao's pet favorites were worth redeeming. But there were those few who had taken an education and extracted the good from it, or had been among the followers of A-Xuan — or, more accurately, followed him based on his support by Mianmian or Jin Huiqing. And she saw great potential in that newer generation, "I still intend to make something worthwhile out of my son's inheritance, but — what do you think it would take to manufacture a few exiles?"

"Send them south to learn about the cultivation of that tea they're so obsessed with." Wen Qing suggested.

And actually — that wasn't a terrible idea. "A nice mountain retreat? I bet I could sell that."

The extended Jin family was not uniformly irredeemable, but the worst voices were loud. If she convinced those like the aunt and uncle who fought over that expensive tea that they could benefit from taking up residence in a small estate in that region, Jiang Yanli could easily keep them there indefinitely.

"You could sell a boat to a dairy farmer." Wen Qing said, with the flat irony that passed for flirting from her.

Jiang Yanli flirted back, of course, far more purposefully with her husky, Yunmeng manners. “You sweet talker. You’re just saying that because you want to get between my legs.”

“You say that like it’s a secret.”

If they had been face to face, Jiang Yanli would have shown her A-Qing exactly what that sort of teasing earned her.

As they were, all she could do was use her words.

“Don’t worry. I’m just as eager.” She slipped her hand between her thighs, finally allowing herself the temptation to bring herself pleasure. It was that much sweeter for the wait. “Do you want me now? Have you been thinking about it this entire time? Maybe you’ve been waiting all day for me to tell you to touch yourself.”

A sharp intake of breath came through the Speaking Stone.

Wen Qing did not admit it aloud, but by now Jiang Yanli knew the woman she fully intended to marry one day.

“Undo your robes for me, but don’t take them off.” She said, her voice low with desire. “I want to feel the weight of your breasts in my palms. If I were there with you, I would play with them until you couldn’t stop grinding on my thigh, even if I ordered you too. Until you’re desperate for me.”

This time, when Wen Qing spoke, she was breathless. “You know I already am.”

Her A-Qing was so easy for her. And if part of that was a lifetime of being undervalued, Jiang Yanli knew exactly how that felt. She would always respect Wen Qing’s boundaries, and her own, though they had not yet come near to reaching the limits of either.

*What will you do to me if I don’t stop?* Wen Qing would say one day, in person. And they would get to enact all their fantasies on each other. But to work towards Wen Qing *wanting* a future, they had agreed to limit how far they went for now.

Every little thing for her to look forward to might help.

“Touch yourself, between your legs now.” Jiang Yanli ordered, and could not believe she was saying it. “If I were there, I would tease your neck with my lips. I would nip your most sensitive spots with my lips, lingering just long enough to drive you crazy.”

Wen Qing gasped through the stone, softly at first and growing louder, and Jiang Yanli imagined her back arching under her own touch as she kept up her rambling instructions, turning to praise as A-Qing neared the edge.

“My turn.” Wen Qing said, her voice still low and husky with her pleasure. “Tell me how it felt, making me do as you say?”

“I never touched you.” Jiang Yanli said, and it was the truth. She had yet to touch beneath A-Qing’s waist, no matter how she craved it.

A-Xuan had always submitted to her direction without a fight.

It was... intriguing, to know that A-Qing would not. Perhaps she would return as much as Jiang Yanli gave when they could finally meet. She increased her pressure, bucking against her own hand.

"I'm waiting." Wen Qing said, like she was merely waiting for the temple drums to strike noon. That sarcastic yet genuine style of hers was exactly why Jiang Yanli had fallen in love with her.

"*A-Qing*." Jiang Yanli chastised her even as she lost herself to her own pleasure.

Wen Qing was still breathless sometime after. "I can't imagine what that would be like if I could touch you,"

"Still don't believe we'll get you out?" Jiang Yanli said in a teasing tone, though she was deadly serious. A-Qing might push aside A-Xian's every new update, but Jiang Yanli listened on edge with anticipation.

"I don't believe anything can end this." At least Wen Qing was finally being honest.

No matter how much Jiang Yanli wished for Wen Qing to be more comfortable and confident in herself. She preferred honesty with past transgressions to transgressions in the making, no matter what a visitor's pass claimed.

"But I have more than one reason to want you too now." Wen Qing said, softer than Jiang Yanli had ever heard.

Jiang Yanli thought Wen Qing might have more faith in A-Xian than the state of her mind would allow her to admit.

Lan Xichen had paid little mind to Su Minshan's words at first. He had not felt much about his death, save a sorrow that A-Yao would be sad, and worry that Xue Yang still had not been found.

What was taking Wangji so long, he had to wonder.

Wangji had never taken so long to handle a night hunt before. The longest had been three weeks, when the townspeople who called for assistance in the first place were hiding the demonic cultivator behind everything, and Wangji had taken the time to unravel the demonic cultivator's work, letting them off with a warning.

He left that aspect out of the official report, and Lan Xichen had not broken his confidence. If Wangji believed the situation would not be repeated, Lan Xichen chose to trust him until proven otherwise. So far, Wangji's faith had been justified.

Which was exactly why he was certain *something* was off with Wangji, though he doubted Su Minshan was correct about its cause. He was unlikely to give Xue Yang the benefit of the

doubt, especially when his misdeeds seemed to grow by the day.

There had been a massacre in Wugang recently, one of his disciples had reported, though the details remained unconfirmed.

He paid little mind to Su Minshan's words, until they were confirmed right in front of him.

When Lan Xichen entered the dining hall the evening of the special lecture, the novice disciples were already seated at their meal.

"But variations on Rest can help spirits in different circumstances." His cousin's child, Xiao-Yi, raised his voice to speak to an outer disciple a few seats down as Lan Xichen passed, heading towards the clan leadership's table. "I don't understand why our teachers insist so much that we play every note exactly according to the music."

"Who told you variations can assist?"

"Oh, Hanguang-jun's friend said!" Xiao-Yi said around a mouthful of rice that Lan Xichen did not bother to correct him for. "And Hanguang-jun agreed, so he must be right!"

"Hanguang-jun's friend?" Lan Xichen asked, making a great effort to ensure that his voice remained steady. "And when did this happen?"

"Oh, just to—" Xiao-Yi began to answer, but A-Yuan cut him off with a sharp gesture.

When he saw Lan Xichen watching him, his nephew sat on his hands, blinking innocently up at him. He looked so much like Wangji with that expression, he could have been his son by blood, and of course his smile was often compared to Lan Xichen's. Thought it was well known A-Yuan was adopted, he did not try to stop rumors to the contrary. Each person who believed Wangji had a child with a lost wartime lover was one less person who could threaten Wangji's eventual recovery from Wei Wuxian's death.

Lan Xichen had never even told A-Yao the truth, though he suspected he had figured it out.

"Well, Wangji is technically correct." He told the novices, who turned to him, rapt, at their sect leader's instructions. "However, it can be dangerous to experiment with cultivation methods. Perhaps keep your experimentation to supervised lessons with Hanguang-jun for now."

"I guess." Xiao-Yi pouted, picking at his food.

Lan Xichen left dinner early, citing an urgent matter had come up. One he needed to respond to, but very simple to handle, he told his assistant.

Where Hanguang-jun was staying was a very simple matter to determine, though none of the townsfolk had bothered to send a message that he was there. Of course, Hanguang-jun would have informed his older brother the sect leader that he was staying in town that night.

They did not know that Wangji had been telling him less and less for — years, accelerated suddenly over the few months.

“Have you seen my brother?” He asked night market vendors as he passed. “A matter has come up I need to consult him on.”

“Personally, Lan-zongzhu?” A vendor selling skewers of meat asked.

“It’s a sensitive matter, I’m afraid I can’t entrust the matter to anyone but him,” He smiled, self-deprecating, and the vendor relaxed.

“It sounds important.” They sighed. “I hope Hanguang-jun is not too disappointed when you interrupt his date, Zewu-jun. We’re all so happy he’s found someone, he’s helped us all so much. A man like that deserves to be happy.”

Lan Xichen was aware that Hanguang-jun was beloved of the people of Gusu and elsewhere, but he had not known they would be protective of him even against his own brother.

He would never harm him, of course.

It was just that he worried.

The restaurant was a local one, but not one he would have expected of Wangji’s taste. It was run by a family whose grandparents had come from Meishan, and adopted many of the local dishes, advertising a glazed roasted duck with plum sauce as their specialty, but also continuing the tradition of hotter Meishan cuisine in Gusu.

Lan Xichen stood just inside the doorway without attempting to hide himself. Wangji did not notice, nor did his companion, though more than one of the other guests in the restaurant turned to stare before hesitantly returning to their meals.

Wangji and his companion shared a bowl of mango pudding between them, pressed together shoulder to shoulder though there was room on the other side of the table.

He watched as Wangji smiled, leaning into the man like a flower unfurling towards the sun, though he would have sworn it was not possible for them to get any closer without one sitting in the other’s lap.

Lan Xichen had never seen his brother act that way with anyone, not even Wei Wuxian, always too stiff and inhibited to take that single step that had been necessary, before Wei Wuxian went and threw away Wangji’s heart for power .

This man — tall, rather too symmetrically pretty, but with a smile that proved Wangji remained weak for a certain type of teasing — was dressed in the black and gray-green of a Nie disciple. A pattern picked in silver thread indicated he was of a high rank, yet Lan Xichen had never seen him at a cultivation conference.

Laughing, the Nie disciple dotted a drop of pudding on Wangji’s nose.

Rather than snap or threaten, as he should have done with a stranger, would likely have done even with a friend — and Wangji did not have friends, despite Lan Xichen’s ill-advised attempts at encouragement in their youth — Wangji’s expression turned strange. Almost playful. A word Lan Xichen never would have thought to associate with his brother before.

Wangji caught the Nie disciple's hand. And, challenging, brought it to his lips. And into — into his mouth.

Lan Xichen shut his eyes tight.

When he opened them, Wangji and this Nie disciple he had never mentioned, yet was apparently enamored with, were scrambling to their feet, never separating or looking away from each other.

Lan Xichen could have stayed right where he was, and they never would have noticed.

He stepped behind a foundational post anyway, and Wangji and his Nie raced by, smiling at each other.

There was something oddly familiar about that Nie's smile, now that he saw it up close, though Lan Xichen was certain he had never seen his face before.

"Would you like the change, Lan-zongzhu?" The restaurant's proprietor asked.

"No, thank you." Lan Xichen said, after a too-long pause. "Consider it a repayment."

The restaurants staff had been forced to witness whatever that was too.

Lan Xichen took the long way back to the Cloud Recesses, concern dogging his every step up the mountain.

Lan Xichen knew his brother. And perhaps the Lan story of one true love was a myth, one many among the Lan believed and more liked to perpetuate to other sects as an ideal, but Wangji did not open up to others easily. If this was real, it could not be new.

A Nie Disciple was certainly an improvement on an enemy of the Cultivation World, yet it did not sit right with him.

Wangji would have told him if he met someone new. Especially someone Lan Xichen could not regularly tease him about. He would want to relieve Lan Xichen's worry for him.

Though he had never told Wangji about his relationship with A-Yao directly, that was because he could tell Wangji knew the first time he saw Lan Xichen after the day A-Yao declared they were free to be together. He did not mention it directly, as a courtesy.

Wangji did not, for whatever reason, like A-Yao. He had even said as much, more than once, which was a step far beyond his usual glaring.

Lan Xichen took it as a good sign that Wangji had yet to say anything now that he and A-Yao were officially, if secretly, together.

Therefore, this man was not someone Wangji wanted him to know about.

Was this even a man Wangji truly wanted?

A man who understood Wangji, and wanted him for who he was, would not take him away from a critical night hunt to — to — to play house, or whatever this was.

Lan Xichen had been worried about his brother on a subconscious level almost since the day he was born. That worry had spiked and ebbed many times over the years.

It had been six, almost seven years since his worry spiked this high.

A few days later, Lan Xichen entered the forbidden room. He was searching for a book for a disciple who needed it to solve a night hunt case, but did not quite meet the requirements for access to the forbidden room yet. The book was on one of the first few shelves inside the room, which carried the most commonly needed references for night hunts. An organization intended to separate the books that contained dangerous but frequently relevant information from techniques that should only be attempted by those that had reached certain milestones of cultivation and from knowledge that should never be touched.

The door was unlocked when he arrived. Only a select few disciples even had access to the Forbidden rooms, and they and the elders generally recorded their visits in advance, though it was not strictly required.

Only Wangji did not. Had not, since the day Lan Xichen first allowed him official access, acknowledging that Shufu's attempts to deny him were only worsening Wangji's newfound disregard for the rules.

He rounded the corner, and found exactly who he expected.

Wangji stood with one hand behind his back, absorbed in one of the books full of truly forbidden knowledge.

Lan Xichen couldn't even say anything.

He was permitted to be there, by Lan Xichen's own decree.

"Wangji. Why didn't you tell me you were back?" He asked, not wanting to betray his prior knowledge.

"I am not staying long." Wangji lied, for he had already been in Caiyi Town for days without putting in an appearance.

There was something different about the way he walked. He hoped it wasn't — Heavens forbid — a limp. For a limp to last past the morning in a cultivator — Lan Xichen could not think about it, in regard to his brother.

But no, it was the opposite. Wangji seemed to walk more easily, like the weight of the world had rested on his back, but now he shared it with another.

For a moment, Lan Xichen thought Wangji's Nie might be good for him.

But then, out of curiosity, he picked up the text Wangji had been looking at. The Collection of Turmoil, it was called. The title alone did not sound promising, and as he paged through it — Lan Xichen's fists tightened.

There was a missing page.

This man was manipulating Wangji somehow. Lan Xichen was certain of it.

A-Yao finally found time to let Lan Xichen comfort him sixteen days after the death of Su Minshan.

Lan Xichen cleared his schedule and welcomed him at the gates, sweeping him off to the Hanshi enveloped in his robes. A-Yao deserved a break from people demanding things of him, and he would not get one if a single elder managed to catch his eye.

No sooner were they inside than A-Yao shoved him against the door and kissed him, more forcefully than Lan Xichen had thought him capable.

Lan Xichen was hardly complaining.

A disciple delivered their missed dinner to the doorstep, complete with tea and a heating talisman, and Lan Xichen reluctantly extracted himself from A-Yao's grasp to retrieve it.

They ate huddled beneath the covers, the tray precariously balanced across their laps, taking turns feeding each other tiny morsels with their fingers, paying each other more attention than the food. A-Yao relaxed into him more with every passing moment.

Finally, he spoke of the reason he had come.

"Su Minshan called me over to discuss something urgently right before he died." A-Yao turned in his arms, that same wide, round expression in his eyes that had first drawn Lan Xichen in. "You were the last person he saw alive. Did he say anything that might tell you what it was?"

"All he said was Wangji had taken up with a young man. I didn't believe him." It had seemed so far-fetched when Lan Xichen first heard of it. Yet time had — unfortunately — proved Su Minshan correct in death.

"Didn't? Has something changed?" A-Yao asked.

"I saw Wangji with him. There was... no mistaking his reaction." He grimaced. It would have been better if Wangji simply announced his intention to marry an appropriate man, and Lan Xichen was never concerned enough for him to intrude on his privacy.

It was not Wangji's fault, of course. It was impossible to control the heart. He simply wished his brother had better taste.



“I would have expected you to be happier for him.” A-Yao had listened to him wish it were possible for Wangji to move on many times, always concluding in the hope that Wangji would recover enough to find other things that made him happy, rather than simply living for his son.

Lan Xichen wanted his brother by his side for as long as possible, but he’d known that unless Wangji found a reason to live for himself, it was unlikely he would have longer than the life of an ordinary, non-cultivator before Wangji took a risk he could not recover from.

Now he worried they might not even have that.

“I would be, if I was certain it was real.”

“What happened?” A-Yao reached up to run his fingers through his hair soothingly, and Lan Xichen found himself confessing what he’d seen Wangji looking at in the Forbidden Room.

A strange, calculating expression flickered across A-Yao’s features, and vanished. “That is very strange. The timing of it, looking for a book about twisted use of cultivation scores, while Xue Yang remains loose. Hanguang-jun is known as the greatest cultivator of our age, and yet...”

A-Yao trailed off, but Lan Xichen was fully capable of filling in the blanks. “Su Minshan told me of him, and then he was killed. You don’t think this Nie disciple is involved with Xue Yang?”

“I wonder if it might be more than that.” A-Yao looked down and to the side. “Xue Yang has a proclivity for... stealing faces.”

“You think he *is* Xue Yang?!!!” Lan Xichen jolted upright, upending the remains of the tray all over the bed.

They had, fortunately, finished its contents already. A-Yao was considerate, in not brining up difficult topics mid-meal. Only the dishes themselves, a few crumbs, and the tea leaves ended up on the top cover. Lan Xichen would have to change it, before they slept, but he did not move to do so then, too focused on the problem at hand.

“I can’t be certain.” A-Yao set the tray on the floor, as he preferred the outer side of the bed no matter which wall it was placed against, and began setting the dishes back in place. “Not without catching him in the act.”

“I don’t think Wangji can handle another loss.”

Lan Xichen believed Wangji would hold on until Sizhui reached his majority no matter what. But once Sizhui was twenty —

Let it be a curse. Let him remember nothing more than a blur when it was broken.

He needed more than ten years before his brother sought out a demon that could take him down with it.

“Erge.” He said, but Lan Xichen did not relax under his touch.

“A-Huan,” A-Yao tried, and he slumped against him. “I don’t believe your brother is truly in love with him. He’s simply been made to believe he is.”

“He’ll be relieved, when we break the curse he’s under then.”

“You won’t lose your brother if I can help it.” A-Yao promised, and Lan Xichen slid down into his lap, partially dislodging the blanket he had yet to change.

As A-Yao’s hands continued to card through his hair, Lan Xichen believed him. “You’ve helped me so much, when I’m supposed to be comforting you.”

A-Yao smiled down at him, his dimples making his heart skip a beat, as always, no matter what else he felt. “You comfort me by existing, A-Huan.”

“I feel the same way,” Lan Xichen kissed him softly, and tried to believe everything would be all right in the end.

## Chapter End Notes

Lan Xichen might, perhaps, maybe, be projecting

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Summary

A murder, a suspicion, and a duet

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** Minor (very minor) character death, mild description of gore, mention of pregnancy

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Xue Yang was in Baling.

Xue Yang was running roughshod over poor, helpless Qinghe.

No, Xue Yang had never left Lanling.

Word of Xue Yang had spread to the wider world, though he had never been well known outside cultivation circles before now. The war that followed directly on the heels of the Chang Clan's massacre had effectively overshadowed it.

Blame was easy to place for the rumors, of course.

It had been necessary to inform Nie Huaisang of the danger he was in, but Nie Huaisang had never met a rumor he did not spread in his life.

With rumors so widespread, it would be easy to take advantage.

On the day the first spring flowers bloomed in Lanling, word arrived that Sect Leader Bei had been found murdered in his bed.

He was found by the concubine he had gone to bed with, sneaking back in to pretend she had not left in favor of spending the night in her own bed. Bei-zongzhu, it was well known among his concubines, snored heavily.

The concubine guessed something was wrong when she did not hear his snores blaring away like a poorly played xun. She thought perhaps he might have woken early, and readied her apology. Bei-zongzhu was free with his hands, but unlike his old friend Jin Guangshan, he slept only with his own concubines, and plied them with jewelry, silk, and pets. He was not

cruel, though the harem as a whole feared his wife, and took measures to avoid getting with child. *They* could not count on being sent safely away like Qi-xiao-niang.

Bei-zongzhu would forgive her, if she pleaded personal needs, and provided him with a bit of morning satisfaction.

The beginning of her apology died on her lips, replaced by a scream.

Xue Yang, it seemed, was everywhere and nowhere. It had been so long since the last confirmed kill to his name that Jin Guangyao had no reason to doubt the news when it arrived.

Still, something did not sit right with him about it.

Xue Yang was on a quest for revenge against Jin Guangyao. Bei-zongzhu was a convenient sycophant, to be sure, but Jin Guangyao had several of those on retainer.

The man's concubine had almost become more noticeable, recently, for her assistance in A-Su's political scheming.

Unless Xue Yang had decided to start picking off his allies one by one — and why would he do that, unless he was working with a political rival? Xue Yang did not care about politics, he cared about causing pain.

It would be beyond stupid to go after A-Ling in Lotus Pier, where Jiang Wanyin kept him under such close watch his six-year-old nephew had submitted a formal complaint in his most recent letter in which the word smothered was used a total of fourteen times.

He had recently learned it.

Xuanyu was a more likely option, but he had access to demonic cultivation techniques Xue Yang had never known. Jin Guangyao would have put even odds on which of those two would come out of a match alive.

Huaisang was well-protected in the Nie Fortress, but Xue Yang knew a way in and out.

Jin Guangyao was aware he had many enemies, but the majority of those still living generally held themselves above such things as hiring a murderer.

There was no reason for Xue Yang to murder Bei-zongzhu unless Xue Yang was not Xue Yang.

He had suspected as much since Lan Xichen informed him of Lan Wangji's new paramour. Erge might be willing to believe his brother could be so easily deceived, but while Hanguang-jun did not use his intelligence for politics, he had broken curses long considered unbreakable. If Hanguang-jun intended to kill Xue Yang, Xue Yang would be dead by now.

So perhaps Xue Yang *was* dead, and this was someone else entirely. Someone who should have been dead.

Someone his sister might be willing to work with, if she learned the truth behind a few events.

Jin Guangyao flew the sword to Luochuan, for the first time showing his newly developed abilities in public.

Even by sword, the journey to Luochuan took several days. On the evening of the second day, it was necessary to stop before the sun sank below the horizon, to avoid a stretch of land crisscrossed with lava floes and poisoned with resentful energy.

Anyone could have guessed within a short distance of their camping site.

As the camp settled down to sleep, Jin Guangyao stepped out of its bounds and into the trees. He lingered, just out of easy earshot of the camp, where his sleeping companions would not see.

A rustling came from overhead, and Jin Guangyao pretended he had not heard it, acting as though he were searching for a convenient place to relieve himself in private.

There was just enough light from the moon, and the camp's firelight filtering through the trees to see the silhouette of a cultivator in the shadows.

Jin Guangyao drew his sword, holding it casually, almost like he was bored.

The figure.... did not attack.

Jin Guangyao sighed. He always had to do everything around here.

He shifted on his feet, and sent Hensheng curving towards his stalker, who leapt out of the way, and drew his own sword.

Though Jin Guangyao attempted to draw his stalker into combat, his attacks were repeatedly deflected and run from. Frustrated, he struck towards the figure's neck the next time he got close enough.

Pausing, the shadowy figure looked around, but rather than bat Hensheng away, made a sharp up and down movement with his arm, and a cloud of smoke billowed forth. Closing his eyes tight against the sting, Jin Guangyao reached outward with his other senses. Unlike many cultivation techniques, sensing without seeing required skill rather than strength.

It was a skill he had honed before he had any but the most basic, largely inaccurate cultivational texts for reference. He had developed it further while spying on Wen Ruohan, in a palace where every day more and more soldiers disappeared and were transformed into the undead.

The blow came from directly above, and Jin Guangyao had already side stepped, moving to parry the follow up strike.

He flowed into the movements with ease, the only difference that he could put more force behind each blow and last longer. His sword no longer quickly became a drain on him.

Jin Guangyao let himself flow into the movements, enjoying the sensation of his own innate power flowing through him as much as the knowledge that he was on the verge of winning this drawn-out miniature war.

No one got to take his pawns of the board without consequences.

Yet the figure continued to pull tricks, forcing Jin Guangyao to fall deeper and deeper into his senses, and pull-on deeper resources to fight them. He sent one bolt of spiritual energy in his attacker's direction, then another, determined to wear him down. No one could keep this up forever.

Yet when his attacker finally stumbled, his heart lurched in his chest, and for a moment Jin Guangyao felt like he was in two places at once.

The figure took advantage of his momentary paralysis to throw something at him, and one of his disciples sprang forward from out of the trees, sending a talisman flying. It made contact before the object could leave the figure's hand.

Of course, Jin Guangyao had not truly wandered off alone.

A man dangled in a glowing net, and a dead duck with a paper pinned to its breast by an arrow fell to the ground.

Jin Guangyao had long expected another visit from Xue Yang. A journey of this distance was too good an opportunity for Xue Yang, or the one impersonating him, to pass up.

He wanted Xue Yang captured alive, for there were plots in need of untangling and Jin Guangyao's never strong reputation was in dire need of repair.

Jin Guangyao inspected his slack features closely. They belonged, unmistakably, to Xue Yang, but as he had told Erge, that meant little. There was no seam, but if he was correct about the imposter's identity, the Yiling Patriarch could have easily modified the face-stealing technique for greater flexibility and deception.

The sword — or rather, saber — he carried was more telling.

“Xue Yang” was sent back to Lanling escorted by a contingent of Jin and Lan disciples, while Jin Guangyao continued on accompanied by a smaller escort in the morning.

A dead sect leader was the most patient kind of sect leader, but a dead sect leader's wife had no patience at all.

Bei-zongzhu appeared to have been killed with his own sword. Similar but not identical to Su Minshan, it had been left with the body, covered in blood. He had been slashed open from neck to groin, with several more furious slashes crisscrossing his torso.

It spoke of anger, rather than Xue Yang's usual glee, or even the strange detachment of the way Su Minshan had been left.

Xue Yang was here was written on the ceiling, as in Baling, but in messier handwriting. That could have been due to the angle, or it could have been an attempt to obscure the handwriting.

Jin Guangyao frowned down at the body, left in place at the order of Bei-furen with a talisman to keep it from rotting. He had never known a spouse to leave the body in place to wait for an investigation for longer than a few hours. Even Jin Guangshan had ordered his wife's body given its rites in a timely fashion, and he hadn't so much as glanced at her since the death of their son.

Interesting, that Bei-furen would preserve this scene for observation.

Outside the room, Bei-furen stood separately from the six concubines, five of whom — all women, Bei-zongzhu had a strong, well-known preference — were huddled around the girl who had found the body. *They* looked distraught, though Bei-furen could not manage to fake it.

She, a few years older than the others, her features harsher yet still lovely, clutched an ornately embroidered handkerchief in her hands. Every so often she rubbed it into her eyes causing them to swell like she'd been crying, without ever shedding a single tear.

As Jin Guangyao questioned them, Bei-furen sneered at her husbands' concubines. Save for the one still in Koi Tower, mother to the deceased sect leader's current heir and the lynchpin of an alliance, Jin Guangyao suspected they would all be thrown out the moment he departed.

When he was satisfied he had the pieces to what had happened well in hand, if an absence of proof, he turned to Bei-furen.

"Bei-furen, who stands to gain the most from your husband's murder?" He asked, without an expectation of honesty in her answer.

"Currently, Qi-xiao-niang." Bei-furen looked like she was eating a lemon. "But she'll have a big surprise waiting if she comes to claim her reward."

"Qi-xiao-niang has been in Lanling for months, Bei-furen." He pointed out.

Jin Guangyao did not miss the way she said currently.

She'd already pinned the murder on Xue Yang, why bother to mention her main rival for her husband's attention? Clearly, she had little experience in executing plots.

"I am regent now and you will address me as such." Bei-furen snapped.

"Are you? It's not your son who stands to inherit." Whatever this woman had planned to ensure the sect was hers — and Jin Guangyao could hardly judge,

"My child will, when they're born." She patted her still-flat stomach proudly.

*That* Jin Guangyao thought, explained quite a bit. Why she would choose now to do away with the repulsive man, when they had already been married for years. “I hope that news serves as a balm to you in this difficult time.”

“Thank you,” She sniffed. “I wish you a pleasant journey home.”

“Not so fast, Bei-furen.” Xue Yang, or the Yiling Laozu, had been here to deliver one of his little notes to him. Whether he had been there before was yet to be determined. “I’m afraid I have to call a cultivation conference immediately. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I must ask you to journey back with me.”

“As Xiandu wishes.” She said through clenched teeth.

He had made another enemy it seemed, but some enemies were easier to deal with than others. For instance, neither of them wanted Qin Su’s assistant leading the Bei sect. Common ground was such a lovely thing.

Qin Su adjusted her claws on Lan Wangji’s shoulder as he stepped through the portal.

Her presence helped him pass through, despite her status as a not-quite-ghost. Qin Su had not been entirely certain it would work. Jiang Yanli had Jin blood in her veins now, as well as her marriage, but Qin Su no longer had veins. There had been no real way to test the matter, only Mo Xuanyu’s word that she could still be recognized by the wards as she was.

The capture of Xue Yang and announcement of the Cultivation Conference had come as a surprise. It was too early — too early to be sure the curse would be undone, too early to be certain Jiang Yanli would have the political support she needed.

Still, they had no choice but to act.

“Mo-gongzi,” Wen Ning said, as he heard the approaching footsteps. “I didn’t think you were coming tonight. Isn’t there a .... You’re not Mo-gongzi.”

Wen Ning should be thankful Hanguang-jun was not Jin Guangyao.

“I am not.” Hanguang-jun agreed.

Wei Wuxian probably would have found that hilarious. He seemed to think Lan Wangji was in possession of the greatest comedic gift in the world, even when all Lan Wangji did was twitch his eyebrow.

Wen Ning scrambled to his feet, his chains scraping against the ground as he drew his hands together to give a formal bow. He stuttered as he said Lan Wangji’s title, and apologized for assuming.

Lan Wangji did not bother to wave him off.

He removed the key Mo Xuanyu had given them from his sleeve, and opened the cell door.



“Wen-gongzi,” Hanguang-jun said, kneeling on the dirty, straw covered floor. “Please hold out your hand and stay still.”

Wen Ning did so, head tilted quizzically to the side, until Lan Wangji unlocked the chains around his wrists and ankles, sending them crashing to the floor.

Then he gasped, clutching his freed hands to his chest and planting his behind firmly in the dirt. “What are you doing?”

Qin Su squawked, and jumped up to land on Wen Ning’s hair. As a bird, her hearing was enhanced without effort, and she would know if Jin Guangyao was not where he was supposed to be.

They made quite the image. Hanguang-jun in his blue so pale it looked ghostly in the glow of his talisman light, a ball hovering over his hand. He knelt at Wen Ning’s feet yet seemed to tower over Wen Ning’s shadowed and hunched form.

Nie Huaisang would want to paint the image, but Qin Su would absolutely never describe it to him. He could never do the scene justice.

“I am setting you free.” Hanguang-jun said, which Qin Su felt was fairly obvious.

Wen Ning shook his entire torso back and forth, arms crossed over his chest and clutching at his throat. “No. No, it’s not time yet. I couldn’t live with myself if Jie—”

Lan Wangji lurched forward to grab him by the shoulders, somehow finding the strength to hold a panicked fierce corpse in place. “We must get that curse off now, or you will not have the opportunity to see her again. We need both of your testimony, and if Jin Guangyao dies while your sister is still cursed, the consequences will be irreversible.”

Wen Qing would be nothing more than a pile of ash, but Qin Su would still have had more tact than to tell her brother that, even if she were not currently a crow.

“Did something happen?” Wen Ning asked.

Lan Wangji nodded, but did not elaborate.

Wen Ning nodded slowly, and extended his wrist towards Lan Wangji again. The characters of his curse began to swirl and distort, but Qin Su did not peck them into submission this time. The curse needed to be active to be dispelled, part of why the process was so very risky.

Lan Wangji retrieved a Speaking Stone from his pocket. Wei Wuxian’s as he had not used the time before Jiang Guangyao forced their hands to create a new one.

He had been “busy” apparently. Qin Su took that to mean with Lan Wangji, in the carnal sense, and refused to think on it further.

“Wen Qing, are you prepared?” Lan Wangji asked, as the stone began to glow, its connection made.

To Wen Qing's credit, she did not try to persuade them to leave her behind this time. Possibly because she was not the only one at risk anymore.

"Absolutely not." She said shakily. "Count me down."

"Jie?" Wen Ning said. "Jie, is that you?"

If he had been capable, he would have been in tears.

A choked sob came through the stone. "Hi, A-Ning. I miss you so much."

"Jiejie. Jiejie, you're really alive, I —" His voice hitched repeatedly, and though he could not produce tears, which did not stop him from bawling. Just a young, innocent boy getting his sister back.

Qin Su would have done the same and more if she could hear her son's voice just one more time.

She shook off her melancholy.

This was very sweet and all, but they were in a rush.

Since Lan Wangji did not seem to know what to do about it, she dug her talons into Wen Ning's scalp.

He winced, though she was fairly certain he could not really feel pain, and straightened, calming quickly. "Sorry."

"You will have plenty of time for a complete reunion later." Lan Wangji finally said. "Wei Ying needs us all now."

"Yes." Wen Qing said. "I want that — we'll have it. But Wei Wuxian and Yanli have to come first."

"It was like hearing her brother's voice finally made her truly believe it was possible for them both to live. Why had none of them thought to try this before?"

"Jiang Yanli?" Wen Ning asked in confusion.

Qin Su and Mo Xuanyu's conversations with Wen Ning had filled in the broad strokes of Jiang Yanli's story, but Qin Su had not felt it appropriate to gossip over his sister's relationship status in front of Mo Xuanyu. Especially while it had still been unresolved.

"Ah." Wen Qing started, and broke off. "I can explain later. We should start now."

But Wen Ning seemed to understand, smiling as brightly as it was possible for a black-veined walking corpse to do. "I'm so happy for you, Jie. I always hoped you would find someone."

Qin Su loved her brother, but it would be nice if *he* was this supportive.

“Thank you, A-Ning.” Wen Qing sniffed. She had apparently been crying quietly, in comparison to her brother’s sobs.

Lan Wangji waited a polite length of one deep breath before pushing onward, his fingers hovering in position over the strings. “I am counting down now. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.” Wen Qing’s voice shook through the stone, but when Lan Wangji counted down the seconds to the first note, she did not falter.

The song was not beautiful.

Each chord had been chosen to clash with the next, and with the other instrument in the duet, creating a discordant cacophony that sounded the way the curse appeared.

Qin Su had no way of telling whether the beat, the notes, or the energy she put into it was correct. This was unlike any music she had ever heard. Lan Wangji’s expression told her nothing, and Wen Ning’s was all nerves, no more certain of what was happening than she was.

Finally, Lan Wangji slammed his hands down onto the strings as Wen Qing cut off in a sharp trill.

Both were breathing hard, and Lan Wangji stared intently at the symbols still covering Wen Ning’s wrist.

Was it her imagination, or did they seem lighter? They were frozen in place, just like when Qin Su manipulated them, though she was certain she had done nothing.

For the space of a moment that seemed to stretch forever onward, Qin Su thought nothing had happened. But then, the ink began to blur, spreading out into the surrounding skin until it resembled an inkblot, and then finally disappeared entirely.

The bird began to protest at her held breath, and she exhaled.

Wen Ning twisted his wrist this way and that, searching for anywhere the curse might have fled to. But there was nothing to be found. “Did it work?” He asked.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Wen Qing exhaled heavily. “I’ve been thinking about just — stepping outside for years. But now that it’s time...” She cleared her throat. “We don’t have time for me to hesitate.”

Wen Ning nodded sharply, and his brows narrowed in focus, drawing his legs in towards his body. The manacles fell from Wen Ning’s legs as he stood slowly on unstable legs for the first time in seven years. Hanguang-jun reached out a hand to help him, but Wen Ning did not need it, and both seemed relieved not to have to make contact.

Despite the length of his imprisonment, Wen Ning quickly gained his balance, stabilizing himself against the wall, thanks to his state of not quite living. Qin Su wasn’t even dislodged from her perch on his head.

“Step outside at the same time please.” Hanguang-jun backed out of the cell as Wen Ning took a tottering step forward.

“I’m at the edge of the cell.” He said. “Jie, I’m —”

Scared for you, he did not say.

“Me too, A-Ning. I’m going to count down now.” On three, Wen Ning stepped out of the cell that had been his place of slumber for so many years.

On their end, nothing happened. He stayed on his feet, stayed alive, did not so much as sway.

Through the stone, Wen Qing inhaled sharply, and was silent.

Wen Ning grabbed the Speaking Stone from Hanguang-jun’s hands, cradling it close to his mouth. “Jie? Jie?! Are you all right?”

There was a pause, in which the world seemed to stop moving, and Qin Su wondered if they had failed.

And then —

“Yes, yes, I’m —”

Wen Qing cut off for a moment, and Wen Ning clutched the Speaking Stone so tightly Qin Su feared it might crack.

“I can breathe,” she said, in a wondering tone. “I haven’t felt the sun on my skin in — it was a foolish idea to do this during the daytime. Who decided this.”

She attempted to resume her usual gruff manner, but there was nothing Wen Qing could do to hide her all-consuming relief.

Finally, finally she was free.

Qin Su knew something of being trapped, though her prison had been and still was, partially of her own making, and she did not regret the choice she had made that brought her there.

“Jin Guangyao decided this.” Lan Wangji got to his feet in a hurry, his guqin vanishing before it could hit the ground. “There’s no time. Wei Ying — We cannot waste time.”

There was an almost nervous energy to him, as he slashed open the manacles on Wen Ning’s feet.

“A-Li has saved me so many times. It’s time for me to save her back.” Wen Qing agreed. “Go to him now. I need to bring a piece of evidence — I’ll meet you there.”

Lan Wangji did not even wait for her to finish speaking before he spun on his heel and stalked towards the exit, where he would pause in the Treasure room just long enough to grab Wei Wuxian’s sword before storming the battlements of the discussion conference, the first

Hanguang-jun had attended in many years. As Wen Ning scrambled after him, she lifted off from his head.

Qin Su lingered for a moment, studying the marks Wen Ning had left on the chains, before following.

Jin Guangyao might have temporarily gained the upper hand, but he would not win in the end.

## Chapter End Notes

I still have most of three chapters left to write -- I'm been focused on getting the words out rather than editing because I still want to finish this by the end of the year -- but we're in the home stretch now!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Summary

The Koi Tower pottery supply decreases drastically.

## Chapter Notes

If you read the Ch. 22 on the first day it was posted, I made a name-sized typo! Jin Guangyao has not figured out Jiang Yanli at this point, only Wei Wuxian. Sorry for any confusion!

**CW:** mild body horror

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jiang Yanli stood at the front of the banquet hall and smiled like her heart wasn't doing its best to beat out of her chest. There were so many factors in play at once. So very many things that could go wrong. So very many half-developed plans where any number of steps could be rife with miscalculations.

Yet in announcing the capture of Xue Yang, Jin Guangyao had forced their hands.

"Thank you for your prompt attendance," She greeted Sect Leader Yao at entrance to the banquet hall. "We appreciate everyone clearing their busy schedules on such short notice."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world!" Sect Leader Yao declared. "We're all eager to see that scoundrel finally bite the dust. Aren't you?"

"We all are." Jin Guangyao returned from personally escorting Lan Xichen to his seat right at the foot of the dais, a task that was absolutely not in the job description of the Chief Cultivator. He glanced at her, daring her to contradict him.

Jiang Yanli made her bland smile even wider.

"What a disgrace," Jin Huiqing muttered to her as their husband exchanged greetings with Jin Guangyao, the couple having the misfortune to arrive just behind Sect Leader Yao.

"I could never say such a thing about a venerated sect leader." Jiang Yanli replied.

Jin Huiqing rolled their eyes up and to the side.

She hid a laugh behind her sleeve that came out far more nervous than she would have liked. “I need you to slip out in a few minutes. Meet me at the moon bridge in the garden just outside this hall.”

“Just what have you cooked up?” Huiqing asked.

“You know I can’t boil water without turning it into a weapon.” It was true of Qin Su if a grievous lie on her part.

“I like this new devious side of you.” Huiqing turned to follow their husband and, side-eying her, added, “It reminds me of an old friend.”

It was only extensive practice in keeping her expression under control that kept Jiang Yanli from blanching.

A-Cheng, when he arrived, was grumpy and brisk, his only greeting a complaint that this had better be over soon so he could get back to his nephew. Jiang Yanli agreed. The day she could hug both her brothers and her son at once was so close she could taste it, if only this one night went off without a hitch.

A-Qing would be there too. Had to be there too.

When Qin Su’s siblings arrived, near the last of the guests, Jiang Yanli followed them inside.

Inside, tables were set up for each sect as usual, laden with the expected refreshments. Disciples mingled amongst themselves as they waited for the conference to begin, as though it were any other conference. But an undercurrent of eagerness ran through the crowd, simmering just below the surface.

It had been a long time since the Cultivation World last gathered to draw blood. It had been denied the downfall of Tingshan He, carried out under the cover of darkness, and it hungered for bloodshed.

“Jie, I have something to speak to you about.” She spoke directly into Qin Xifeng’s ear, so she definitely heard, but made no acknowledgment, moving instead to take her seat.

Qin Xifeng had not treated Jiang Yanli like this — but her own sister was beneath notice. She was so set in her own opinions, she couldn’t be bothered to re-evaluate them when presented with evidence to the contrary.

Jiang Yanli wondered if all this effort to sway her was even worth it.

“Jie.” She reached out to grab Qin Xifeng’s wrist firmly, pulling her up short. “This is important.”

“It can wait until after the banquet.” Qin Xifeng tried to shake her off, but she held tight.

“No, actually Jie, it can’t.” Qin Jianyi informed her. “If there’s ever been a time to start paying attention to our little sister... well, no. You should have gotten to know her a long time ago. If you had, we probably wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

“Get to the point, Jianyi.” Qin Xifeng grumbled — but at least she was listening.

“This is urgent and we’re going with her.” He insisted. Jiang Yanli had not had the chance to inform him of any of the details of the plan, but he knew to follow her lead. He wanted his older sister turned away from the man who had hurt Qin Su more than anyone.

On cue, Nie Huaisang suddenly took a few running steps forward, carrying a pot of tea, and tripped, sliding headlong into a group of other sect leaders, spraying them with the hot liquid.

Qin Xifeng looked at him with disgust. “I suppose there is time before this can get started.”

As they walked towards the meeting Jiang Yanli had arranged, Qin Xifeng turned to her. “I’ve heard you’ve been making a name for yourself recently.”

Which she would have known, if she had ever bothered to speak to her sister. Qin Su might not care about her sister’s opinion, and might not be there to witness this, but Jiang Yanli could be angry on her behalf. She knew Qin Xifeng was fully capable of being a caring friend — that was the entire force behind this last-minute attempt to change her allegiances — so it was that much worse that she couldn’t bother to spare a thought for her own sister.

“You heard that from me,” Qin Jianyi said, distinctly displeased. “Because you somehow didn’t notice her name popping up in reports? Or her participation in meetings?”

“I’ve been very busy taking over the sect from father —”

Qin Jianyi snorted.

“I’m certain your work has been very stressful lately,” Jiang Yanli said pleasantly, as though she were not currently experiencing a level of anger on Qin Su’s behalf that would have had her brothers breaking Qin Xifeng’s nose.

“Thank you, A-Su,” Qin Xifeng said, exasperated at her brother, and blissfully unaware. “See, she understands.”

When they arrived, Jin Huiqing was already there.

Jin Huiqing let go of the hooded figure, and stepped back. Qin Xifeng gasped.

Luo Qingyang eased back her hood. “Xifeng-jie, it’s been a while.”

“You — you —” Qin Xifeng jabbed her pointer finger in Mianmian’s direction, but did not get any closer to finishing her sentence.

“Take your time for once,” Huiqing snapped. “You say things you don’t mean when you’re emotional.”

“Oh, like you don’t.” Qin Xifeng regained the power of speech to continue the feud Jiang Yanli had come there to settle.

“I mean what I say.”



“Oh, do you?”

Mianmian put a hand on each of their shoulders. “Will you both calm down? I didn’t come all the way here to watch you yell at each other.”

For a moment she thought Mianmian might succeed, but it wasn’t to be.

“Luo Qingyang, you dare to show your face here?” Qin Xifeng shook Mianmian’s hand off her shoulder, and turned her anger on her. “Now, after all these years?”

Mianmian huffed and her own temper flared. “Oh, how dare *I*? Did you every bother to ask Zixuan what he thought of me leaving?”

“I didn’t need to. You abandoned him and left him to die.”

“He wanted me to be *happy* and *safe from his father*.” Mianmian threw her hands out, her voice climbing in volume with each word. “Do you have any idea what it was like in Koi Tower in those days? What it’s like *now*? I would have come back when he became sect leader — we agreed!”

“He never got that chance! Because he was murdered by a man you stood up for!” Qin Xifeng got close enough to Mianmian to kiss. Or bite.

“Oh, was he? The man who saved a bunch of elderly farmers from *this sect*? That’s right, I actually spoke to Hanguang-jun. A trustworthy eyewitness. Instead of believing Jin Guangshan’s bullshit.”

“Hanguang-jun was deluded. Everyone knows that.” Qin Xifeng did not elaborate on who everyone was. “It was confirmed for me by a credible source.”

“Oh, you mean Jin Guangyao? The one who had the most to gain by Zixuan’s death?” Mianmian planted her hands on Qin Xifeng’s shoulders and shoved her back.

She was at least calmer than Qin Xifeng, but seemed determined to hash out their problems in full before presenting the evidence. Jiang Yanli wished them all the best with that — on any other day.

Jiang Yanli put spiritual energy into a slap against the stone wall. They froze, giving her their full attention for one shining moment. “I have evidence that Jin Guangyao murdered his father, Nie Mingjue, and Jin Zixuan.”

“What?” Qin Xifeng asked, her mouth falling open. Her voice teetered on the brink of shattering and there was no immediate denial.

Jiang Yanli hoped they might get through to her, so long as she didn’t mention the framed the Yiling Patriarch aspect too early.

But Jin Huiqing was no help at all. “Don’t stop them now, I’m enjoying this.”

Qin Xifeng rounded on them, and her husband’s friends were arguing again.

Jiang Yanli sighed. She didn't have time for this.

Qin Jianyi shook his head. "You should return. I'll make sure they make it back."

Behind her, the arguing continued.

Under other circumstances, Wei Wuxian would have loved to sit back with a bottle of wine and watch the fireworks as Nie Huaisang managed to dishevel the most obnoxious sect leaders in the land further with every attempt to "help" them clean up the spilled tea. Somehow, he managed to break at least a dozen cups and a table in the process.

A young man in Jin robes, the Vermilion dot of the main line on his forehead, and a silver fox mask was certainly giggling into his cups. He was seated, uniquely, not among his own sect, but among a group of other young masters, who laughed along with him.

But as the second ranking Nie disciple in attendance, Wei Wuxian was instead dodging shards of shattered porcelain as he marshaled the disciples to attempt to calm him down. Nie Xiaodan, though she had been brought along for muscle in case things went south, stood outside of the radius of chaos.

If Wei Wuxian wasn't trying very hard to get through to Nie Huaisang — well, no one would blame Nie Xiaomeng for that. Nie Huaisang had truly astounding powers of destruction at his fingertips that the Yiling Laozu himself could only hope to exceed with the aid of the long-destroyed Tiger Amulet.

Even if it weren't for the risk of a thousand minor injuries, Wei Wuxian could not have truly enjoyed the show without knowing the outcome of Lan Zhan's task. He had faith in both of them, but Wen Qing wasn't a musical cultivator. The final composition wasn't easy — and she'd had too little time to practice for his comfort.

If he could have played one side —

But — Wei Wuxian dodged a cup flying at his face — he didn't exactly have time for worry. His life was on the line too, and not *just* from all the people who would want to kill him again if they knew who he was.

One of his allies was apparently doing his level best to make sure Wei Wuxian ended up in a real grave this time.

While Wei Wuxian was busy ducking and swerving and making acrobatic leaps for his life, the sect leaders and their retainers watched uselessly. Jin Guangyao had arranged for a shield to be put up to protect the onlookers, but even he was steering clear of Huaisang's range, content to wait for him to run out of ammunition.

Finally, Nie Huaisang flopped in a heap, panting, and servants immediately swooped in to clean up his mess. The two sect leaders in their thoroughly disheveled robes were swept off

to quickly change. Wei Wuxian and a few disciples stepped in to cart Nie Huaisang back to his own table. He collapsed onto it, shaking in an excellent imitation of shame.

But of course, Nie Huaisang did not have a shameful bone in his body, and was actually having a fit of laughter. A blank faced Nie Xiaodan patted his back as if in comfort as Wei Wuxian sprawled behind his table and took a long swig of wine from a jar. Trust Nie Huaisang to leave his own refreshments intact.

The servants were efficient, but by the time the shards of ceramic were cleared, new tables brought, and Sect Leaders Yao and Ouyang hustled back into their places in fresh but less elaborate robes, Shijie had returned to the hall.

But she returned alone.

He frowned. She caught his eye and gave a slight, exasperated shrug that was all Shijie, despite her altered features.

*That well, huh?* He mouthed, and she shook her head, stopping just shy of rolling her eyes.

Jin Guangyao dropped into the Peacock throne with hair plastered to his forehead. “With a slight delay, we will begin the conference.” He looked slowly around the room, meeting eyes with each attending sect leader, pausing briefly at the empty space next to Sect Leader Hua, and startling when he reached his ally’s position. “*Where* is Qin Xifeng?”

A servant stationed near the peacock throne, in fine robes indicating their supervisory position, waved a nervous looking maid at the back forward. After a quick, whispered exchange, the first servant leaned towards Jin Guangyao to convey what Wei Wuxian assumed was the answer to his question.

“What do you mean she’s yelling at Jin Huiqing in the garden?” Jin Guangyao sighed loudly and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ll have to start without her.”

He had the fleeting thought that it was strange he chose to complain aloud, but the majority of gathered cultivators laughed, and the members of the two sects in question slumped in resignation. A calculated admission to engender goodwill, then, for the show that would follow.

Jin Guangyao risked looking weak for taking so long to capture Xue Yang, after all. Not to mention hiding his supposed rampage until it spread beyond his borders.

On the other hand, why would he have called this conference, if he didn’t suspect there was *something* more to the game?

Shijie was certain he planned to accuse Qin Su of plotting against him, and she had most of her pieces — minus the ones arguing in the garden — in place to deal with that.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t so sure. Nor was Nie Huaisang, who had waited until Wei Wuxian met up with his retinue on the way to the conference to admit that the captured Xue Yang was among the most recent generation of Nie to come of age, and had not fought in the Sunshot

Campaign. His technique was not truly vicious enough to imitate Xue Yang, and he'd taken the place of another, more experienced Xue Yang imitator, recently injured by an unusually well aimed stone in a faux-fierce corpse attack on a caravan, in antagonizing Jin Guangyao without consulting his sect leader.

The rashness would be frightened out of him after this, Nie Huaisang had said with a long sigh.

Wei Wuxian didn't need Nie Huaisang to spell it out to realize Jin Guangyao, intimately familiar with Xue Yang's capabilities if not so familiar as the rumors they'd spread claimed, had almost certainly realized that disciple was not Xue Yang.

The disciple didn't even have Jiangzai with him. It was currently in the possession of another disciple, seated at the back of Nie Huaisang's retinue, but it wasn't a precaution there was a good way of using.

"I called you here today because Xue Yang's reign of terror has gone on for far too long." Jin Guangyao stood, and descended the steps to speak from the base of his dais. Simultaneously bringing himself closer to the assembled cultivators and, with his throne framing him, reminding them he was above them. "Most recently, Bei-zongzhu was found murdered in his bedchamber. I and my retinue were fortunately able to apprehend him when we were ourselves attacked on the way to pay our respects to his widow."

A woman in mourning whites sniffled loudly, blatantly fake. Another woman, also clad in white and seated behind the first, quietly rose, hefting a toddler onto her hip, and went to stand by Shijie.

"Bring him in." Jin Guangyao ordered, and at his words the double doors at the entrance to the hall slammed open.

The prisoner was draped in more chains than could possibly be needed to hold someone who wasn't Wen Ning, his dark robes hanging in strips. He was dragged into the room by the elbows and flanked on by five disciples on each of three sides, a mix of Jin and Lan. The front was left open so the gathered cultivators could meet his burning glare from beneath a shield of lank, greasy hair.

As he was brought to a halt in the center of the room, one of the Jin disciples grabbed the prisoner by the hair, and forced his head back, exposing his face to the crowd.

Despite the warning, a furor ran through the crowd. Wei Wuxian included.

It was strange to look at Xue Yang from this angle, though he'd caught sight of his own reflection while wearing that mask often enough. The expression this Xue Yang wore could easily have been the feral snarl of the real thing, the snarl Xue Yang had likely worn when he realized what Shijie had done to him in the ritual that — though he did his best to think about it as little as possible — had transformed his body into Wei Wuxian's.

"This looks very much like Xue Yang, correct? Some of you will remember when he was last brought to this hall." Jin Guangyao smiled wide, his dimples displayed at their fullest depth.

“Are you saying he’s not?” Sect Leader Yao blurted out on cue. “But he looks just like him!”

“Xue Yang himself has been known to disguise himself as others using wicked tricks.” Jin Guangyao explained. “I myself thought the culprit was Xue Yang for some time, but recent events and the absence of his sword at his capture has made me suspicious. Fortunately, I have a method of determining the truth. My dear brother has derived a method of revealing falsehoods from the Yiling Patriarch’s notes.”

A cup dropped with a clatter, and Wei Wuxian turned to see the boy in the fox mask — Mo Xuanyu — frozen in shock at his brother’s exposure of his work. A few of those gathered around him inched away, casting him looks of disgust. He wilted visibly, until one of the boys seated next to him, in the blue and pink of the Kong Clan, shook his head violently at a disapproving someone across the room. And, firming his chin, took Mo Xuanyu’s hand.

Mo Xuanyu stared at him for a moment in shock, then looked over at Shijie, who nodded at him encouragingly. He gripped the boy’s hand tight and removed his mask. The other boy reached up to touch a vivid scar, visible even from across the room, and smiled. Mo Xuanyu scooted closer, blushing bright red.

“From who?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

Wei Wuxian was trying his best not to look at him, not to let himself break in the process. His gaze kept straying towards the man who had once been not only his shidi, but his brother, and now hated him more than anything else in the world.

Best not to look at him until Shijie forced the issue.

Jin Guangyao paid his brother no notice, not seeming to notice he’d upended the poor boy’s life, and after a sufficiently dramatic pause, sketched a talisman over the Xue Yang’s face.

With a squelching sound that definitely did *not* happen when the mask was removed voluntarily, it slowly detached, the color bleeding out of it slowly as though transforming from skin to wood. With a final wet noise, it dropped to the ground, and bounced. The Nie disciple beneath bared his teeth at the Chief Cultivator, and only a sharp motion from his sect leader stopped him short of spitting in his face.

“Who *are* you?” Jin Guangyao’s expression was blank with confusion as he stared down at his former attacker. Clearly, he’d been expecting *someone*, and random disciple was not it.

The kneeling man did not reply, but his question was answered anyway.

“Shixiong?” Someone among the assembled Nie asked, quickly muffled by the hands of surrounding disciples. As one, they smiled innocently as the assembled cultivators turned towards them.

“Xiaodan,” Nie Huaisang whispered through gritted teeth. “Why is a disciple who doesn’t know about the Xue Yang plot here?”

“I don’t know who’s in your spy network. Pick them yourself next time.” She whispered back.

“I believe that *is* a Nie disciple, Xiandu.” Sect Leader Ran spoke up. “One of my disciples claims to have met him before.”

“A Nie disciple. Interesting.” Jin Guangyao turned to his own disciples lining the room. “But not the one who served congee after your corpse powders exposures?”

“No, Xiandu,” They replied in unison.

Is one of the disciples Nie-zongzhu has with him the one?” He asked, and Wei Wuxian’s heart sank.

“Nie Xiaomeng. He’s uh — he’s right there, Xiandu.” One of the Jins he’d served with his own two hands pointed him out.

He’d also poisoned her several times, which she might be figuring out now, so. Wei Wuxian supposed that was fair.

It hadn’t been corpse powder though!

“Nie Xiaomeng.” Jin Guangyao walked over to his table and spoke conversationally, almost casual, were it not for the implied threat of death and dismemberment. “Were you adopted into the clan? I don’t recall a cultivator by that name.”

Jin Guangyao glanced to one side, meeting the eyes of — Lan Xichen, who sat forward on his knees, gripping his table white-knuckled.

Wei Wuxian had known their little vacation was an objectively terrible idea. But he’d wanted the chance to get to know A-Yuan, and it had made Lan Zhan *so happy*. Wei Wuxian would do an infinite number of stupid things for the sake of Lan Zhan’s smile.

“You could say that. I came from a branch clan up north, close to the border with Tianjin. My distant cousin honored me by bringing me into the main clan.” He cast his eyes down in the best approximation of demure he could manage.

“How touching.” Jin Guangyao’s voice was cloyingly sweet. “After the tragic loss of so many of your disciples last year along with my beloved sworn brother, new blood must have been necessary.”

“I need someone to do the work for me.” Nie Huaisang spoke up, putting his best whine into it.

For once, Jin Guangyao wasn’t convinced. Too many coincidences rolled into one, he supposed. “So. You, Huaisang, were unaware of that disciple imitating the most violent demonic cultivator since the Yiling Laozu himself. Were you aware of this one’s assignments with Hanguang-jun?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.” Nie Huaisang fluttered his fingers, pretending to shake hard enough he dropped his fan.

Jin Guangyao had the perfect venom in store for that. “Dage never would have permitted such a thing.”

Nie Huaisang’s expression hardened. Nie Xiaodan grabbed his wrist, but Jin Guangyao had already noticed.

“That clarifies matters, I think.” Jin Guangyao told the room.

“How so?” Sect Leader Yao asked.

“There was one man who showed his face around almost every confirmed death associated with Xue Yang as well as after many other encounters. He always had a remedy for corpse powder prepared when the cultivators reached the nearest inn.” Jin Guangyao strode back into the center of the room, hands clasped behind his back like Lan Qiren mid-lecture. “Yet he was never seen fighting that supposed Xue Yang. I wonder now, was he really helping?”

Sect Leader Yao sputtered, the implications still too complex for him to jump to conclusions.

“A conspiracy?” Sect Leader Ouyang asked, stroking the length of his beard. “What could he hope to achieve?”

“I have my suspicions, but first —Do you have anything to add?” Jin Guangyao asked the bound disciple, still kneeling in the center of the room his eyes glued to the floor. He flicked his wrist subtly enough few would notice, and a talisman attached itself to the man’s chest. He slumped, the tension going out of him in a way that Wei Wuxian only recognized because he had done that to Lan Zhan once. “Tell me who ordered you to do this.”

The man opened his mouth to reply. “Zong—”

Lan Zhan swept into the room like a beautiful, avenging immortal. He’d brought out a set of pale *blue* robes, similar to but more mature than the set Wei Wuxian had drooled over in his youth, overlaid with a thin outer robe of white lace. A comb Wei Wuxian had bought him in Caiyi Town was nestled into his hair. Lan Zhan had dressed up just for him.

Lan Zhan’s gaze swept the room, searching worriedly, and almost went past him. But not quite. His eyes met Wei Wuxian’s, and he relaxed, imperceptibly to anyone who wasn’t looking. His lips turned up, ever so slightly.

Wei Wuxian forgot everything else and stared.

Until Nie Huaisang elbowed him in the side. “You’re drooling.”

He checked, and found the drool was only metaphorical. And it wasn’t like Jin Guangyao hadn’t just told the entire Cultivation World they were fucking, anyway.

“Wangji?” Lan Xichen exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting you here.”

“Naturally, one who had been hunting this supposed Xue Yang for some time would want to be here.” Jin Guangyao jumped in smoothly. “Interesting that the great Hanguang-jun had so much difficulty with one man, isn’t it?”

“Hanguang-jun was known for his close relationship with —” Sect Leader Yao broke off, the color draining from his face. “Is that — it’s the Ghost General!”

Wen Ning was a shadow in the doorway. At the uproar that followed Sect Leader Yao’s shout, he shuffled quickly to Lan Zhan, and gave the room an awkward little wave from safely behind him. He was still dressed in the rags of his imprisonment.

Jin Guangyao himself went pale, as he realized the implications behind Wen Ning’s freedom. There were several possibilities, but none of them were good for him.

Wei Wuxian couldn’t relax though, not until he knew what had happened with Wen Qing.

“Wangji?” Lan Xichen repeated, looking between Lan Zhan and Wen Ning, standing so close together and obviously allied. “What is — what is this?”

“Do you trust the evidence of your eyes, Xiongzhong?” Lan Zhan asked, needlessly cryptic because he was no less prone to drama than the rest of them. Wei Wuxian adored him.

“A-Yao?” Lan Xichen asked.

“Wherever did you find him?” Jin Guangyao asked.

“So you *didn’t* know?” A sect leader he didn’t recognize asked. One of the new ones who’d taken part of Qishan, he assumed. Their words were for Jin Guangyao, but the devastatingly sharp tilt of their eyebrow was all for Shijie.

Shijie smiled, slow and knowingly, and the sect leader nodded at her.

“Know?” Jin Guangyao certainly *looked* shocked, but though he was adept at hiding his secrets behind his dimples, Nie Huaisang was the better actor. “Zhai-zongzhu, how would I know?”

“Why don’t we ask the man?” The same sect leader asked. “He seems conscious enough, despite what we were always told.”

“Yes, where has the Ghost General been all these years?” Sect Leader Hua put in his support for Shijie.

Every eye in the hall turned to Wen Ning.

Who stammered, unused to being the focus of so much attention. Wen Ning clutched his robes tight, and shook, attempts at words fading into chattering teeth.

Lan Zhan looked at him, asking what to do, and Wei Wuxian motioned for him to step in front of Wen Ning. Little in the way of assistance, but all that could be offered.



At least — all *they* could do.

Wen Qing strode into the center of the room alone, deflecting attention from her brother with one move. “How are we alive? You can thank Xiandu himself for that.”

Wei Wuxian had to stop himself from jumping to his feet and rushing to hug her, so great was his relief. It had worked! She was alive to stick needles in him for many more days to come!

He could not, however, stop himself from grinning.

But Jin Guangyao smiled too.

“Thank you, Wen Qing. Your appearance here only confirms my suspicions. Honored Sect Leaders.” He took the time to bow to each sect leader in turn. “I beg your indulgence for one moment more before you make your discerning judgments. It is impossible for Wen Qing to be here without the aid of one steeped in demonic cultivation, and no one has yet matched the Yiling Laozu.”

Fuck.

He’d half suspected Jin Guangyao knew something about him before the conference began. Who knew what tortures the captured Xue Yang had been subjected to, and what he would give away.

He’d be honored, if Jin Guangyao wasn’t about to expose him *before* Shijie held the highest power in the Cultivation World.

“It seems I’ve been amiss in my courtesies.” Jin Guangyao bowed low over his hands. “This one greets the great Yiling Laozu.”

Chapter End Notes

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Summary

Wen Ning invents bowling\*

## Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays if you celebrate!

\*sorry for the weird summaries, trying not to spoil everything. Also, today I learned bowling was invented in ancient Egypt (there is no actual bowling in this fic)

**CW:** mild body horror, severed body part

At Jin Guangyao's words, Shijie stepped forward, already opening her mouth to speak. Wei Wuxian shook his head at her, ever so slightly, and she stepped back. Revealing her association with him *now* would overturn all their plans.

He just had to persuade everyone present he wasn't himself. Without letting Jin Guangyao use the talisman that would remove his mask.

Easy.

"You think I'm the *what*?" He demanded, and laughed, cutting it off short before it took on its infamous character.

One or two other people in the room laughed too, but it was a nervous sound. Jin Guangyao had them half-convinced with only an accusation.

Jin Guangyao smiled, pleased at their reaction. "Would you prefer to go by —"

The sound of a table overturning, dumping its contents onto the ground drew his attention away from Jin Guangyao.

After that day, the Jins' stores of ceramic tableware would be much depleted.

Jiang Cheng stepped over the shattered dishes and stormed towards the Chief Cultivator. Jin Guangyao took a step back as he approached, and visibly steeled himself against the fury of Sandu Shengshou. "Jiang-zongzhu, would you like to assist me in interrogating him?"

“*This* is Wei Wuxian?” Jiang Cheng snarled. “Wei Wuxian is dead. Not possessing some pretty little Nie.”

Wei Wuxian knew Jiang Cheng hated him now — for good reason — but did he have to make both his real and Nie identity sound unworthy of being the sludge on his boots?

“This is Nie Xiaomeng, I’ve known him for years!” Nie Huaisang threw himself across the table — clear of all fragile dishes — to grasp at Jin Guangyao’s and Jiang Cheng’s robes.

Jiang Cheng side stepped him, his lip curled so high in disgust it nearly touched his nose.

“Did you not say you were recently adopted into the clan?” Jin Guangyao asked, glancing around the room and ignoring the recent suctioning of a starfish to his person. “I heard him say that. Did all of you?”

“That doesn’t mean I haven’t known him!” Huaisang insisted.

“I never heard you mention him.” Jin Guangyao ostensibly spoke to Nie Huaisang, but his voice retained the quality of addressing the room at large. “He says he’s from a branch sect, but you’ve never mentioned him. When I was your brother’s vice general, I attended many meetings with branch sect leaders, and never saw such a man. He would have fought in the Sunshot Campaign, surely. He looks close to your age.”

Wei Wuxian had no defense to that. No one could say they’d witnessed Nie Xiaomeng fighting in the Sunshot Campaign, or verify his membership with a branch sect. He could have been injured, maybe, but for the entirety of the campaign? The only excuse would be that he’d been caught in a demon’s trap for years, facing challenge after challenge to find his way out. That sort of thing was rare — the cultivation world would have been rife with rumor, even with the Yiling Laozu still around.

Shijie wouldn’t get to gently reveal they were both alive after all.

“There’s one easy way of settling this.” Zidian sparked on Jiang Cheng’s wrist. “And then I never want to hear *his* name from your mouth ever again.”

Jin Guangyao shook his head. “There’s no need for violence. We’ve already seen one masquerade revealed today. I believe this is the same trick. Zidian can only terminate possessions.”

Jiang Cheng stood down, but sparks of jagged lightning continued to play around the edges of his bracelet.

“San-ge!” Nie Huaisang protested. “That’s my disciple, you can’t just —”

“Do you have something to hide?” Jin Guangyao asked. “This won’t do anything to him if he is who you say.”

Nie Huaisang slumped, shaking his head mournfully at Wei Wuxian.

If Wei Wuxian ran — or Lan Zhan decided to start stabbing, he looked tempted — he would give himself away and get whipped by his own brother in the process. Shijie shouldn't have to watch that. And Jiang Cheng, well, he'd have no problem separating Wei Wuxian's soul from a possessed body in the moment. Though it wouldn't work, and if Jiang Cheng still cared about him at all he'd cry about it later, and either way Shijie shouldn't have to watch them resolve their differences this way. She'd be disappointed and hurt, though Jiang Cheng couldn't have known Wei Wuxian had not taken his sister away from him forever.

So he did not attempt to run.

*Sorry for the extra mess, Shijie*, Wei Wuxian thought, pretending indifference as he allowed Jin Guangyao to sketch the intricate talisman he had used on the Nie Disciple over his own face .

The mask burned as it rejected him, peeling back from his skin like an insect's exoskeleton, transmuting itself from part of Wei Wuxian to a piece of ordinary firewood. The talisman took its time, drawing out the process long enough his nails drew blood from his palms as he stopped himself from tearing it off, unsure if he might tear his own face away with it.

Finally, the mask dropped to the ground, useless against any spiritual use in the future. Wei Wuxian's skin was left as tender as a freshly healed wound in its wake.

The pain was nothing against the terrified shrieks, though he thought he had inoculated himself against public hatred ages ago. Worse was the hardening of Jiang Cheng's jaw as Zidian unwound from his wrist, sending sparks of lighting to the ground and catching his table cloth on fire — quickly smothered by Wei Wuxian because contrary to popular belief, he didn't actually want to burn the world down.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted, and even now, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but miss the more innocent irritability of a younger Jiang Cheng.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Zhan sounded shattered, and Wei Wuxian wished there was a way to tell him he did not intend to die here. Not this time. They had many more years of raising their son and bringing justice ahead of them.

Shijie clasped Qin Su's sword tight, but did not yet step forward.

Leaning back on his hands, he tilted his head to survey the assembled clan leaders from under his lashes. “You didn't do a very good job of killing me in the first place. Did you all want another try so badly?”

They did.

Scrambling to their feet, the assembled cultivators rushed him. Jiang Cheng raised his arm — to capture him or slash him across the face, Wei Wuxian could not tell.

Wei Wuxian did not have the advantage of a nice, friendly amulet that wanted to kill all of his enemies for him this time. But he did have a Wen Ning.

Wen Ning barreled into Jiang Cheng, sending him flying back into the crowd of cultivators. Jin Guangyao had, wisely gotten himself out of the way as well.

Nie Xiaodan carried her protesting Sect Leader out of harm's way.

The others, well. Wei Wuxian didn't get to find out if they would have helped him before Lan Zhan pulled him to his feet and towards the now less occupied back of the hall, but they didn't join the mob, at least.

Lan Zhan and Wen Ning positioned themselves on either side of him, ready to defend him against the entire world if they had to, Wen Qing behind all three of them.

But even at his peak Lan Zhan could not have stood against *this* many angry cultivators. He did, however, notice that the mob wasn't *everyone*, a few sects still had disciples seated, a few sect leaders and youths gathered around Shijie to watch events unfold. He didn't have time though, to wonder what had caused them *not* to attack the Cultivation World's number one enemy on sight, because the mob recovered quickly from having a shidi-shaped projectile tossed into it.

Jiang Cheng, back on his feet, was at their head, purple as his robes with rage that seemed as much directed at Wen Ning as Wei Wuxian himself.

Lan Xichen, too, was at the front of the crowd. He, though had not yet drawn his sword. That meant little, of course. Zewu-jun, the First Jade of Lan, could draw either of his spiritual weapons in less time than it took to blink. He reached a hand out towards Lan Zhan in concern. "Wangji, step away from him."

Lan Zhan did not dignify with an answer.

"You could consider it." Wei Wuxian said, though his heart tore itself in two at the very idea. "I'll surrender. Let Shijie get on with it while I sit in ropes."

Lan Zhan pulled him close and kissed him, harsh and fleeting, and told him exactly what he thought of that. In Wei Wuxian's own words, which he hadn't realized Lan Zhan overheard so many years ago.

He stared at Lan Zhan, and hoped his eyes said *I love you too*.

"I see now it's not a curse, A-Yao was wrong." Zewu-jun muttered nonsensically, and a glance at Lan Zhan showed he could offer no clarity to his words. "But Wangji, please, think of A-Yuan."

"If you think taking my son's father away from him a second time is best for him, I have nothing more to say to you." Lan Zhan's voice was ice, and he never looked directly at his brother.

Lan Xichen knew his brother well enough to tell when he was losing him. He reached towards him, stepping forward, "Wangji —"

“It’s no use arguing. He’s as stubborn as Wei Wuxian.” Jiang Cheng threw out his arm to keep Zewu-jun back, Zidian wrapped around his wrist and sparking dangerously close to the First Jade’s beautiful face. Second most beautiful of course, after Lan Zhan. “Is that a saber you’re wielding, Wei Wuxian? Now you pick up a sword?!”

Wen Ning bristled, opening his mouth, and Wei Wuxian feared he was about to impulsively reveal a secret he could not let him air, so he elbowed him in the side.

“Wei-gongzi.” Wen Ning was not the type to whine, but there was the barest hint of complaint in his acquiescence.

“It’s a saber, actually.” He showed off Yuanzheng to the crowd, allowing them to admire the Nie blacksmiths’ fine handiwork. “And it’s not even possessed! I’m surprised too.”

“So you did dupe Nie Huaisang into helping you.” Jiang Cheng sneered.

“Try the other way around.”

From the corner of the room where he was held safe by his first disciple, Nie Huaisang called his name in protest for revealing that little detail. But it wasn’t like Wei Wuxian wanted people thinking he was capable of resurrecting himself. Then they’d never let him run off to marry Lan Zhan — which, admittedly, was currently looking like a long shot.

Jiang Cheng ignored his words. “If you have a saber, fight me yourself, instead of letting your boyfriend or that sack of rotten meat do it for you.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I surrender. You can sit on me while the grown ups argue. It’ll be just like old times.” He hoped Jiang Cheng would not choose sitting on him *literally*, but it would be better than trying to stand three against the world.

“I don’t surrender.” Lan Zhan glared daggers at Jiang Cheng, which was sweet, if misguided.

“Not helping.” He hissed.

It wasn’t Jiang Cheng or Lan Zhan who tipped the balance into pitched battle, though, but some young woman in Yao robes who shouted something about Wei Wuxian having killed her father — at Nightless City presumably — and decided it was a good idea to rush Hanguang-jun, the Ghost General, and the Yiling Patriarch all on her own.

Wen Ning stepped forward to meet her and tapped her lightly, for him, on the forehead.

She crumpled immediately to the ground.

Wei Wuxian sighed wearily.

“Come at me, A-Cheng,” he taunted in the moment before the mob rushed him. Wen Qing, without needing to be told, retreated from the onslaught.

The Lans moved to cut Lan Zhan off from him — and Zewu-jun had brought a group of newly senior disciples with him to the conference, so Lan Zhan was reluctant to simply blast

them back. None of them wanted to attack him, either, but their confusion and pleading eyes made a more effective wall than three hundred thirty-three elders could have.

Wen Ning read his intentions in his words, and allowed Jiang Cheng to barrel past, before he began grabbing more cultivators by their sword arms, and flinging them back into the mob to keep the rest of them off him. The Jin doctors would have a small epidemic of broken arms and dislocated shoulders to deal with after tonight.

A-Cheng, as he'd requested, came at him Sandu first. For once, Zidian rested on his wrist, despite a plethora of sparks. It was all Wei Wuxian could do to block the first onslaught of blows, as Jiang Cheng pummeled him like he thought he could win twenty years' worth of spars in one fight.

"I need you to capture me." He insisted as he finally managed to push Jiang Cheng back far enough to counterattack with a strike at his thigh. "*Please* trust me on this. After tonight, you can punish me however you think I deserve."

"You think I'd trust you to wipe your own ass?" Jiang Cheng sent a wave of energy through his blade to Yuanzheng that sent Wei Wuxian skidding back on his heels. "You came back and took up with His Royal Iciness *Hanguang-jun* and never so much as sent me a note. You told *Nie Huaisang* and not me."

It was Wei Wuxian's turn to be taken aback. Jiang Cheng had cast him out of the Jiang, by mutual agreement. And even if at first he'd still considered him family, bringing Shijie to see him in Yiling, after Nightless City he must have wished Wei Wuxian had never been born. He'd certainly looked like he wanted Wei Wuxian dead on that cliff.

Of course, it wasn't like Wei Wuxian had chosen the few people to know his identity himself. Jiang Cheng had the order of events mixed up, and Lan Zhan had forced his hand. In this case, Jiang Cheng wasn't special, but it wouldn't help to tell him that.

He faltered, and Jiang Cheng cut an ornament off his belt in a stroke that would have cut him in two if Jiang Cheng had been trying. He'd developed Wei Wuxian's core well, in the past seven years, making it his own with a focus on strength unlike Wei Wuxian's preference for agility. The difference in styles made them better matched than they'd ever been, despite Jiang Cheng's greater practice and more developed core.

"Did you even want to know?" He demanded, pressing his advantage when Jiang Cheng's blade slipped against his, enough disbelief in his eyes that Wei Wuxian could almost believe that Shijie was right, and Jiang Cheng wasn't better off with him dead. As though Jiang Cheng was surprised he doubted him, despite his words only moments earlier. "The Wens and Qin Su *need* to present their evidence. It's for Jin Ling's safety!"

"A-Ling?" Jiang Cheng hesitated.

Wei Wuxian began to lower his blade.

But in Jiang Cheng's moment of hesitation, Lan Zhan broke through the wall of Lans, his brother stepping aside, his head lowered in defeat. And some idiot with poor control threw

their sword. Wei Wuxian never saw who. It flew wide of Wei Wuxian — headed straight for Lan Zhan.

Something buried deep in his core broke loose.

A wisp of resentful energy snatched the sword out of the way. Wei Wuxian had drawn on it, easy as breathing, without conscious effort, and without music directing it. Unlike all those years ago when they came to trap him, the Jin had not purified all the resentful energy in the area. And thanks to Jin Guangyao's efforts, there was an excess to call on beneath their feet.

That was bad for him. He wasn't anywhere near Wen Qing pronouncing him capable of a little demonic cultivation. If she ever planned to, which he doubted.

But he couldn't regret saving Lan Zhan's life.

He'd been under Wen Qing's treatment for months. Hopefully a few dozen resentful energy ropes wouldn't be enough to kill him.

Besides, he'd already opened the floodgates. All that resentful energy needed to go somewhere, and it couldn't stay inside him.

He set it free.

Tendrils of resentment burst free from his body, haloing him in writhing, twisting smoke.

As one, the mob reared back, and even Jiang Cheng stumbled away. The smoke chased after them, tearing away swords and binding wrists, screams of terror following in its path. None of them were truly prepared to face the Yiling Laozu that day.

Just as Wei Wuxian wasn't prepared to *be* the Yiling Laozu that day. Or ever again.

A single tendril reached out to wipe a tear from Lan Zhan's cheek. Lan Zhan shouted something, but Wei Wuxian's vision had begun to go hazy, and all he could hear was the ever-increasing rate of his own heartbeat.

*Oh, Fuck. Hope Wen Qing can fix this,* Wei Wuxian thought, and the resentful energy he'd summoned collapsed with him. Lan Zhan caught him before he could hit the ground.

Jiang Yanli started moving the moment she saw A-Xian fall. To hell with protecting her own secret to keep the advantage, and to hell with not making the same mistake again. She would come between A-Xian and a sword as many times as it took to keep him alive. Wen Qing sprinted forward from where she'd sheltered near Nie Huaisang.

Jiang Yanli stepped between A-Xian and the rest of the crowd as Lan Wangji and Wen Qing knelt over his prone body.

He was breathing. She could see that much, before she had to focus on dissuading the pitchfork wielding cultivators from murdering her brother. Again.



The first to recover stopped short as she crossed their paths, and the sect leaders who had been watching the fight by her side pushed their way to the front of the crowd. Though they did not know what she planned to do, they had followed her lead in refraining from attacking, Sect Leader Zhai and Acting Sect Leader Du Fengyi whose mother was still convalescing after the blizzard, among them. Now, they watched her with curiosity while the others, A-Cheng included, looked at her with trepidation.

She held Qin Su's Chunsheng sheathed in both her hands and stared them down. "Wei Wuxian isn't the one guilty of murder today."

"He was obviously behind the recent murders —" Jin Guangyao appeared suddenly at the front of the crowd, though his lack of broken bones and spotless robes indicated he had not been part of it earlier.

There was no good way to handle that accusation. For once, it was true, and no one would ever believe otherwise. The Cultivation World was always so ready to condemn him, though they never spoke a word against her father-in-law when he paraded his crimes in front of them. "The result of a curse cast by Xue Yang when he resurrected him."

"Xue Yang brought him back? So they are working together." Jin Guangyao might even have thought that, but his next words were designed to instill fear. "Is someone *else* here Xue Yang in disguise? Hanguang-jun perhaps?"

From behind her, Lan Wangji said nothing, surprising no one. But the crowd did allow Jin Guangyao to rile them up again. There were vehement denials — not *the* Hanguang-jun — and demands for Jin Guangyao to try his talisman again to prove whether Hanguang-jun was Hanguang-jun. Someone expressed disbelief that Hanguang-jun would cradle the Yiling-Laozu so tenderly, and someone else asked where they'd been seven years ago. Jin Guangyao looked on smugly.

"Not at all. Xue Yang is dead." She raised her voice, but no one heard.

Jiang Yanli was unaccustomed to shouting, but she inhaled deeply, and shrieked. "Xue Yang is dead!"

The clamor stopped suddenly, leaving a silence so deep that a dropped pin would have echoed through the hall.

She cleared her throat, feeling strangely relieved and raw. Was this how other people felt when they shouted? She didn't think she liked it.

Jiang Yanli took advantage of the brief moment of silence to reach into her sleeve for rolled paper tied with a string. She proffered it out to the most universally respected sect leader in the room, still standing off to the side staring at his brother. Most of the room would not know how biased he was, and why the truth would hit so hard coming from his unknowing mouth. "Zewu-jun, would you care to read this for our guests?"

Frowning, he took the paper, and untied it gingerly.

“It was a curse. The Sacrifice Summon — it trades a person’s body and soul for revenge.” His brows rose as he read the details of the array outlined in ink that might as well have been blood. “The targets of revenge must be deserving, and the soul of the one resurrected will be destroyed if the conditions of revenge are not fulfilled. Wei Wuxian cannot be blamed for *those* murders if this is true. But,” Lan Xichen glanced at his lover, likely thinking of the times Jin Guangyao went running into his arms after Wei Wuxian as Xue Yang scared the life out of him, “as Xue Yang, he massacred villages with demonic cultivation, and for that, he must be held responsible.”

“All rumor, I’m afraid.” Nie Huaisang squirmed in his first disciple’s arms. “Nie Xiaodan, put me down, I am your sect leader!”

Jin Guangyao’s jaw actually dropped. “Huaisang???”

“Oh, yes. You had me fooled for years. I thought I’d return the favor.” Nie Huaisang said. “Wei Wuxian killed exactly seven people as Xue Yang — well, six, actually, he didn’t kill Su Minshan. The rest was all just rumor spread by my disciples, and a little theater. We needed Jin Guangyao to believe there was a threat, to get him to slip up.”

Jin Guangyao recovered quickly, though he continued to look like he expected Nie Huaisang to laugh and say this was all a joke. “I didn’t ‘slip up.’ I have nothing to hide.”

There was no laughter in Nie Huaisang’s smile as he tilted his head in question. “Didn’t you?”

“None of this tells me why the Yiling Patriarch is still alive?” Sect Leader Yao demanded. “You’re all just going to let that Wen dog heal him?”

“Yes.” Jiang Yanli said sharply, almost simultaneously with Nie Huaisang, Wen Ning, and Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji looked up from A-Xian, to glare at Sect Leader Yao, though his hands never ceased patting his hair. “Jin Guangyao twisted Wei Ying’s amulet to kill Jin Zixuan, and again at Nightless City.”

Jin Guangyao laughed. “What nonsense.”

Much of the crowd laughed with him, failing to notice the slight hysteria in the sound, even most of the sect leaders she’d won to her side. But A-Cheng — A-Cheng was slack-jawed, his sword was loose in his grip, the tip digging into the floor, as he stared at A-Xian with the slightest hint of hope in his eyes.

“Perhaps you didn’t do it yourself.” Jiang Yanli conceded. “I would imagine he had Xue Yang or Su Minshan do the dirty work, but we can’t ask them now. So why don’t we start with a murder that’s a little easier to prove. All of us have *thought* Jin Guangyao must have killed his father.”

A murmur of agreement went through the crowd, then, quickly suppressed with nervous glances at Jin Guangyao — who was looking only at Lan Xichen. Lan Xichen would not

quite meet his eyes.

She motioned for Qi Juan to bring forward a woman with her nose and mouth veiled and eyes downcast.

“This is Sisi.” She said simply.

She’d had very little time to speak to the woman, but Wen Qing had sent her off to meet her, just before she rashly announced herself. Sisi confirmed she had the testimony they wanted, leaving the sect leaders who had then surrounded her stewing in curiosity.

Sisi raised her head to stare directly at Jin Guangyao.

“Is that really little A-Yao? When your mother gave you that hat, she hoped you would climb to great purposes. I see you only took that as high enough to fall.”

Lowering her eyes again, she told a story of a face ruined for high-earning work, and an offer that was far too good to be true. The assembled cultivators ate it up like a feast fit for gods.

Jin Guangyao edged away from the crowd, recognizing the bloodthirstiness he had himself stirred up only minutes before turn towards him.

“Catch him! Jin Guangyao should be given a trial!” Sect Leader Yao shouted, blithely unaware of his own hypocrisy.

Lan Xichen put himself between Jin Guangyao and the Yao disciples who rushed to follow their orders. They stopped, unwilling to challenge Zewu-jun. “The word of one woman is hardly evidence.”

“It is not the word of *one* woman.” Jiang Yanli did not attempt to keep the ice from her voice. “Wen Qing, how is A-Xi— How is Wei Wuxian?”

Jiang Yanli cursed herself for the slip. If no one else had noticed, Jin Guangyao certainly had.

“He’s stable, for now. Don’t you dare feed him spiritual energy yourself, Lan Wangji.” Wen Qing stopped the flow of energy from her finger to A-Xian, and stood, slightly wobbly. Her brother was at her elbow, steadying her, before Jiang Yanli could make another slip. “Yan — Jin-furen, may I prevail upon you?”

As they traded places, Jiang Yanli caught Wen Qing’s hand and squeezed it briefly. She settled at A-Xian’s side and did not look at his face.

Donating her spiritual energy was the very first thing Qin Su had taught her nearly a year ago, and she had been given plenty of opportunity to use in the aftermath of the Lieshan blizzard. But it did not come to her so naturally as to cultivators who had learned the technique almost as soon as they formed their cores. With her emotions so frayed, it took her a moment to direct her energy properly, her fingertips tingling and sparking until a stream of spiritual energy flowed forth, and sank into A-Xian’s core to eat away at the scraps of resentment that had escaped Wen Qing’s purge.

She could feel the stagnant pool at the base of his core as well, surging up in flares that must be much reduced from Wen Qing's initial treatment. Jiang Yanli understood why A-Xian would have reached instinctively for resentful energy, but oh, she could so easily have lost him again.

Still might, if Jin Guangyao managed to refute their evidence.

Finally, she allowed herself to look at A-Xian. His face was lined with pain even unconscious, and the usual brightness of his skin had faded into an unhealthy gray, though he seemed to breathe more easily with each inhale. Lan Wangji's hands stroked over his hair repeatedly, more motion than Jiang Yanli had ever seen from him, like he was afraid that as soon as he stopped, A-Xian would slip away.

A paperman waved at her, clinging ignored to Lan Wangji's sleeve. That explained why Qin Su had not yet returned to her — she wanted to keep her own voice in case it was needed. Jiang Yanli had not had much time to spare her a thought, and still had little time now.

Ensuring that the flow of energy continued, she returned her attention to A-Qing.

"Jin Guangyao held me captive for what would have been seven years next month." A-Qing was saying, just beginning her testimony despite Jiang Yanli's long distraction. She'd missed some complaints on Wen Qing being permitted to speak at all. A-Qing could speak on her own behalf, of course, but Jiang Yanli wished she had not had to. "For the last approximately two years, Sisi was imprisoned in the same building as me. Unfortunately, I cannot give an exact date. Time gets twisted in isolation."

Few of the attending sect leaders and fewer of their disciples looked convinced, but at least they were listening. A-Cheng most intently of all.

"Jin Guangyao had me mix many things for him over the years, though of course he never trusted me. He wanted poisons. A way to better develop his core. The Yiling Patriarch's inventions. And kept me there by tying Wen Ning's life to my imprisonment. You can go visit my prison if you would like. There's plenty of evidence to be found."

Lan Xichen faltered for the first time, glancing back at the murderer still sheltered behind him. "To improve his core?"

He must have known of the tonic Wen Qing had risked the hearts of more than just Jiang Yanli to persuade him to take. When Wen Qing asked Lan Xichen if he had seen Jin Guangyao drinking a mixture he refused to fully explain, he refused to reply.

When she paused, Sect Leader Ouyang demanded, "Why would we ever trust a Wen?"

"Do you have another reason why we're not ashes on a breeze?" Wen Ning found his voice to defend his sister.

Sect Leader Ouyang did not have an answer for that.

Neither did Jin Guangyao.

At least, not a believable one.

Jin Guangyao pretended to innocent shock at the accusations. “If Wen Qing and the Ghost General were imprisoned here, I had no knowledge of it.”

“No knowledge of what goes on in your own sect, Xiandu?” Nie Huaisang stepped forward to take Wen Qing’s place.

Wen Qing gladly retreated, sinking gracefully to her knees to resume her post by A-Xian.

“He’ll be all right,” She promised, after a brief inspection, and Wen Qing would not make promises of recovery she could not keep.

“Why are you doing this to me, Huaisang? I always treated you like a brother.” Jin Guangyao dared to step out from Lan Xichen’s protection, reaching out a coaxing hand towards Nie Huaisang as though he were a child having a tantrum. That was how he’d always seen him, after all.

Nie Huaisang, when he spoke, was a winter that never ended, frozen far deeper than the one they’d just survived. “You killed my Dage. Would you like to know where we found his head?”

“Didn’t Chifeng-zun disappear?” Sect Leader Qi asked.

“And the rest of Chifeng-zun’s body?” Sect Leader Hua wanted to know.

“Why have you all forgotten about the Yiling Laozu?” Someone towards the back shouted.

Jin Guangyao stared at Nie Huaisang, stunned, as more questions were yelled out. Until finally his mouth began to curl into a snarl.

“I have it! It’s right here!” Mo Xuanyu pushed his way to the front of the crowd, a talisman-wrapped severed head in his hands. The crowd parted ways around him like he was carrying the plague.

The only sign Nie Huaisang’s heart was not entirely made of ice was his refusal to look at Mo Xuanyu, or the preserved head of his brother in Mo Xuanyu’s hands. “It was in Xiandu’s secret demonic cultivation dungeon, would you have guessed? Just a little ways down the hall from where we found Wen Ning.”

Lan Xichen’s eyes rolled up in his head, and he fainted.

# Chapter 25

## Chapter Summary

Wangxian cuddle mid-impromptu murder trial

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** the usual manipulative relationship, self-harm of the purposefully testing a dangerous musical score on oneself type, mention of physical abuse

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Erge! Someone get a doctor, please!” Jin Guangyao knelt by his side, reaching for his hands, but Xiongzhong flinched away, and the disciples closed ranks around him. These were not disciples he knew personally, as these senior disciples had come of age while Lan Wangji was in seclusion.

It was inevitable that disciples of the age most frequently assigned guard duty would know how often Jin Guangyao stayed the night in Xiongzhong’s quarters. Though there was no gossip in the Cloud Recesses — ostensibly— Lan Wangji had heard one guard mention it casually to another the last time he approached the gates.

Jin Guangyao yelled again for a doctor. There were none in the room, save Wen Qing, who continued to feed Wei Ying energy without pause. It was a slow process, but he thought Wei Ying looked less corpse-like. More like he had decided to take a nap in Lan Wangji’s lap, as was his right.

But Xiongzhong was already recovering his senses.

“I’m sorry,” Xiongzhong said, as much to the air as to his undeserving lover. “I need — I can’t believe it.”

“Erge,” Jin Guangyao repeated, with tears in his eyes. Lan Wangji assumed they were crocodile tears. “Thank you for believing in me.”

Then Xiongzhong said something better than Lan Wangji had dared to hope for. “I need concrete evidence that this is the truth, Jin-furen, Nie-zongzhu.”

It seemed Xiongzhong had finally reached the limit of his trust.

“There have been several instances of concerning testimony given today, but do you have evidence?” Sect Leader Ran asked, the oldest among them, and fair. “We only have your word of where you found that head.”

“Would several of you like to accompany me to Wen Qing’s prison?” Nie Huaisang offered.

“I could bring the esteemed sect leaders to the Treasure Room and dungeons,” A delicate-featured young man with a scar said, who must be that Mo Xuanyu Wei Ying was so excited to meet.

There was plenty of evidence to be found, at least in the dungeons. Though Xiongzhong had taught Jin Guangyao the common musical cultivation techniques — the ones permitted to teach any cultivator with some musical talent and a desire to learn, or Lan Wangji might have received censure for the songs Wei Ying had picked up by ear — he had not purged the dungeons of its ghosts. Whether that was because he saw no need in a space few could access and fewer knew of or to keep a high level of resentment for Mo Xuanyu’s experimentation, Lan Wangji did not care to speculate.

All that mattered to him was that Jin Guangyao was brought to justice, and that he could never hurt Wei Ying, A-Yuan, Xiongzhong, or anyone else ever again.

“I don’t trust him out of my sight.” Jiang Wanyin growled, “I want him bound immediately.”

Lan Wangji was not pleased to find that Jiang Wanyin was the voice of reason here. He was resigned to teaching himself not to mentally call Jiang Wanyin things like “the Fratricide” any longer, for Wei Ying’s sake but he would still prefer never to agree with him. It was a travesty that he had gone uninjured, and moreover that he had been permitted to duel Wei Ying.

Wei Ying still wouldn’t spar with *him*.

“Someone could perform empathy....?” Mo Xuanyu attempted to suggest, but his voice was drowned out by sect leaders. No wonder Wei Ying wanted to meet the boy. Lan Wangji would have to ensure they took proper safety precautions.

“Yes,” Sect Leader Zhai agreed, with a glance at Jiang Yanli. “His spiritual energy should be bound while we review the evidence.”

“You would treat the Chief Cultivator like a common criminal?” Jin Guangyao demanded, sounding like an upset cat. No, that was a disservice to cats, proud creatures who were immensely loyal when treated well. One of those tiny, spoiled dogs popular among magistrates’ families, perhaps.

“If he insists on acting like one.” Jiang Wanyin replied, before anyone else could.

“Is there evidence that may be reviewed *here*, before we do anything drastic?” Sect Leader Ouyang, who appeared to be nursing both a broken arm *and* leg, the least he deserved for joining the ambush against Wei Ying, was on the floor being treated by a disciple who had

managed to keep all of her limbs intact. She set his leg using a sword sheath for an improvised splint and a ripped length of her robes.

“I found this in the Treasure Room in the Fragrance Hall.” Mo Xuanyu handed Nie Mingjue’s head over to the Nie first disciple, and rummaged through his sleeves, finally coming up with a slightly wrinkled piece of sheet music. “It’s from a book in the Forbidden section of the Gusu Lan library, Hanguang-jun confirmed.”

“Today there is one betrayal after another. Xuanyu, haven’t I treated you well?” Jin Guangyao put on a heartbroken expression like a new hat.

That tactic worked no better on Mo Xuanyu than it had on Nie Huaisang. “Dasao taught me that not beating me like my Niang’s family does not mean treating me well.”

“Hanguang-jun is obviously biased, how do we know that really is a forbidden Lan technique?” Sect Leader Yao demanded.

“Zewu-jun, would you take a look at the music for us?” Jiang Yanli asked.

Xiongzhong took some time to reply, blinking more slowly than Lan Wangji did when staring into Wei Ying’s eyes. Finally, he reached out a hand. Jiang Yanli walked over to him, staying carefully out of Jin Guangyao’s reach, and handed it over.

He stared at it for a moment longer. “This is from the Collection of Turmoil. Wangji, I saw you take — I only saw you reading.”

That explained... quit a bit. It told him that though the gap in years between them was small, Xiongzhong still thought of Lan Wangji as his responsibility. It told him Xiongzhong thought him easily manipulated, perhaps thought his worldview had changed because of he loved a man, and not because he had grown and learned to question.

It told him that if they had presented this evidence to Xiongzhong when they found it, perhaps they would have had more time to prepare.

“That page was missing for years.” Lan Wangji confirmed. “Since the start of the Sunshot Campaign, I believe.”

“Jin Guangyao famously rescued you, did he not? He was always so fond of telling that story.” Jiang Yanli added, which she must have learned from Qin Su.

Xiongzhong squared his shoulders, shifting into a proper seat on his knees and finally waving his disciples away. “He did.”

He sounded fragile.

Lan Wangji wanted to protect him from all of this, shield him away where he could forget everything he’d learned of the truth. Shielding Xiongzhong was a selfish desire to save their relationship.



Unlike Xiongzhong, he had learned where to stop. Wei Ying had taught him that. Lan Wangji looked down at him, and drew strength from the peace of his features, relaxed in a healing sleep.

“Jin Guangyao gave me a device to play a song that sounded much like that piece to Dage, with some other parts around it. I’m no musician, but I do appreciate a good concert. The transition was not quite smooth enough to have been composed that way by an experienced Lan.” Nie Huaisang did not sound like his usual self. Lan Wangji had heard from Wei Ying that he was clever beneath the surface, but seeing it was something else entirely. “He said it would help, and thought I would not notice. But Dage was never better after I played it.”

“Tell me this is a mistake.” Xiongzhong turned to face Jin Guangyao, but his voice held no hope.

“It’s a mistake, Erge, I swear.” Jin Guangyao reached for him again.

Xiongzhong flinched away. “I don’t believe you.” And to the crowd, “I will test it on myself.”

“No!” Jin Guangyao cried out, grabbing for the paper, but he was hauled out of reach by the Lan disciples.

Lan Wangji did not *want* Xiongzhong to do this. But he knew his brother, and had expected it.

Xiongzhong took Liebing from his sleeve anyway. “This may be dangerous to anyone who hears it. If you insist on witnessing, I must have my disciples silence a ring around me.”

Someone less honorable than Xiongzhong would have refused to test the piece, playing without spiritual energy or moving their fingers while faking the flow of air. Lan Wangji saw him take breaths with increasing frequency as he played, matched the placement of his fingers to the pattern of notes.

Xiongzhong played through the entire piece not once, but twice, and at the end, tore Liebing from his mouth. He did not quite manage to bring his sleeve up to his mouth before he coughed up blood.

The disciples around him quickly dispelled their rings of talismans and crowded around him, so closely knit Lan Wangji could see nothing more than the glow of spiritual energy flowing from one disciple to Xiongzhong, and Xiongzhong’s attempts to shoo them away.

He would be fine.

Physically, at least.

One time hearing that song did not do permanent damage. Lan Wangji had studied a copy, transcribed over Speaking Stone, without testing it on himself. And because he understood what it was like for the world to turn against the man he loved, he understood why Xiongzhong needed to.

He also understood it would be a long time before Xiongzhong would be able to speak with him comfortably again, once he knew what Lan Wangji had known and failed to tell him.

Wei Ying stirred in his arms, rubbing his nose against Lan Wangji's elbow, and he knew it was worth it.

His eyes opened, and crinkled in happiness as he blinked up at him. "What did I miss?"

Lan Wangji ignored the protest of his back — mild, as though even his scars had decided to be gentle for this moment — and bent to kiss Wei Ying before the world.

Jiang Yanli watched as the scales of authority she had never truly wanted tilted towards her, and as a good, if misguided man fell apart.

There was a line of blood dried under Lan Xichen's lip when he finally summoned the strength to push aside his fussing disciples. "Jin-furen. When you gave permission, did you know?"

Looking him in the eye, she nodded, ever so slightly.

"Permission for what?" Someone asked.

"Were they having an *affair*?" Sect Leader Yao wondered loudly.

"Wasn't Xiandu sleeping with Xue Yang?" Bei-furen asked. Apparently, she and her departed husband had been more alike than rumor claimed. Yet instead of bonding over their shared love of gossip, she had murdered him. Or so her assistant and Sect Leader Bei's concubine, Qi Juan, suspected.

"I would *never* sleep with Xue Yang." Jin Guangyao snapped, and for a moment, his anger showed on his face, before vanishing. His control was slipping.

"So it was an affair." Sect Leader Sima said in a hushed tone.

"With Jin-furen's permission." Sect Leader Yao's returning whisper was not a whisper.

If Qin Su were currently with her, she would have said, *Oh, so he chooses now to use his brain.*

"I can't imagine she wanted to keep sleeping with a murderer." Sect Leader Sima replied.

As the crowd speculate, Lan Xichen drifted away. No attempt by Jin Guangyao to regain his attention worked, even as he grew desperate and stared sightlessly at the ground.

Jiang Yanli had, effectively, won, and without revealing the last-resort evidence that would ruin her — Qin Su's — reputation forever.

But she had done this to him.

Jiang Yanli had thought herself prepared for the guilt, but she had never ruined someone's life before.

She had always been, at heart, a girl who loved to cook, and was never good enough for her mother.

Cooking was simple. A way to make people happy. She could never weigh lives on a scale quickly enough for her mother, choose preventing a disruption to a major trade route over a terrorized village without hesitating, white knuckled with her eyes fixed on Zidian. Not then.

The Violet Spider might better appreciate her daughter now.

Then again, maybe not. She glanced at A-Xian, now sitting nestled in Lan Wangji's arms, who had overcome his dislike of touch enough to use Wen Ning as a backrest. A-Xian looked much improved already. Every time someone looked askance at them, Lan Wangji nuzzled into A-Xian's neck, glaring more fiercely, and A-Xian looked even happier.

Sect Leader Zhai approached her, a satisfied smirk on their face. "Jin-furen, when you implied there was a way to loosen Jin influence over my sect, I had no idea you intended to uncover such a fascinating scandal."

"My daughter has vouched for you many times over," Sect Leader Qi joined them. "I see now why. I support Sect Leader Jiang and Sect Leader Zhai's earlier suggestion to seal Jin Guangyao's spiritual energy while we prepare for a formal trial."

"As do I," Old Sect Leader Ran nodded at her in a grandfatherly manner from his position safely off to the side, out of range of further projectile cultivators if things got out of hand again.

"The Du Sect agrees." Du Fengyi's voice wavered as he spoke up, unaccustomed to his opinion holding weight in the political sphere.

From Jin Guangyao's expression, he might not have been wrong. "You can't all possibly believe this farce."

"I see no reason why I should support you." Bei-furen sniffed. "My husband may have. But you — you dragged me all the way here in my condition after *my husband was murdered*, and how do I know *you* didn't have him killed?"

Jin Guangyao sneered at her. "You know because *you* killed him."

"Why would anyone believe you?" Bei-furen demanded.

But she wasn't a particularly good actor. Sect Leaders Yao and Sima, who had been friendly with her husband, edged away from her.

"I certainly didn't do it." A-Xian said. "Lan Zhan and half of Caiyi Town can attest to that."

"As... as can I." Lan Xichen did not sound entirely present.

If Lan Xichen had spotted them together, and told Jin Guangyao, that explained how he had figured out A-Xian. With that piece of the puzzle added onto the other pieces they had handed him, Jin Guangyao was clever enough to put them together.

With A-Xian cleared of one murder, it was time to move on. Jiang Yanli nodded to Qi Juan, and she stepped forward.

“Bei-furen had me sent here because she was jealous that I gave birth to the heir, but she never liked our husband.” Qi Juan had not liked their husband either and had not minded being sent away, but she had not wanted him dead. “I can see her taking advantage of the rumors.”

Unlike Jin Guangyao, Bei-furen was not experienced enough with murder to stay to defend herself — without any evidence presented against her, and in front of nearly a hundred cultivators, she broke and ran. Before she made it even ten steps, she was captured, bound, and almost instantly forgotten.

“Well?” A-Cheng demanded of the remaining sect leaders. “Are you going to continue to support a man who murdered his own kin?”

A-Xian flinched at that. The remainder of the independent sect leaders, and client sect leaders she had won to her side quickly agreed, but those whose sect business was closely intertwined with Jin Guangyao dithered.

Even Sect Leader Yao had been uncharacteristically silent. If Jin Guangyao had not glared at him in particular, Jiang Yanli had no doubt he would jump to denounce him. But he gulped and paled, clutching his broken arm as he looked back and forth between the terrifying sect leader with a lightning whip and the Chief Cultivator he was so used to shilling for. Perhaps he feared Jin Guangyao might curse him for his betrayal.

Not an entirely unreasonable fear, given the vein jumping in Jin Guangyao’s forehead.

The stalemate was broken when the front doors opened, and Mianmian, Jin Huiqing, and Qin Xifeng walked in. Smiling, laughing, and sporting several prominent bruises, it seemed they had settled things between them the way her brothers used to. They stopped, staring at the disheveled crowd and their many identical injuries, the two contrasting couples and fierce corpse on the floor. The crowd stared back.

“I see you got started without us,” Mianmian said pointedly to Jiang Yanli. “You didn’t bother to tell me Wei Wuxian was back. Yuandao, I see you and Hanguang-jun finally sorted yourselves out.”

A-Xian had been squinting at her, trying to place her. But at Yuandao, recognition dawned on him. “Mianmian! Hi, Mianmian! How are you?”

“I was doing quite well for myself. But then I got dragged back into politics, and now I’m bruised.” She grumbled.

“That does seem to be how these things work.” A-Xian agreed brightly.

“Qin Xifeng,” Jin Guangyao breathed out heavily in relief. “These people have been making entirely unfounded arguments against me.”

“Have they? That’s not what I heard.” She linked arms with Mianmian, and then, more reluctantly, with Jin Huiqing. They patted her hand indulgently. Maybe there was hope for her after all.

“Of course it’s not true.” He gasped theatrically, the performance wearing thin. “You’ve known me for years.”

“You used my grief for Jin Zixuan to make me believe you were better than your father.” Qin Xifeng’s voice carried across the hall. “When all along, you were the one who killed him. Killed them both, but I couldn’t care less what happened to that old pervert.”

“I have *never* used a woman and tossed her away!” He shouted.

And clasped his hands over his mouth, eyes wide as dinner plates.

It was enough to startle even Lan Xichen from his stupor.

From Wen Ning’s sleeve — she must have moved when Lan Wangji decided he needed to cuddle A-Xian in public — Qin Su shook her little paper hands.

So Jiang Yanli said, “Never?”

“A-Su, you said —”

It seemed he found nothing wrong with marrying a woman only to lie to her about why he wouldn’t sleep with her for years.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean.” She raised her brows so he would know explaining her meaning would go worse for him than for her. It *would* ruin her political plans, but if Jin Guangyao still had any hope of making it out of there, he would not want the details of what he’d done to Qin Su or their son made public. “Are we all in agreement?”

“How soon can we hold that trial?” Sect Leader Yao asked nervously. Sect Leader Sima and the other few holdouts nodded fervently.

“Sooner if we stop talking.” A-Cheng grumbled. “I have to do everything myself.”

He advanced on Jin Guangyao, who scrambled back on the floor — and then paused, squinting at Jiang Yanli as though trying to place her. “One moment please.”

A-Cheng had not grown into the kind of man who paused when his enemy asked him for time.

Jin Guangyao rushed the rest of his words out. “I’ll submit to having my spiritual energy bound if you humor me for *just one more moment*.”

He did not protest as A-Cheng pushed the acupoints on his torso to block his spiritual energy. “Talk.” A-Cheng said gruffly, as he pulled Jin Guangyao’s arms behind his back and forced him to his feet.

“A-Su, I have a question for you.” Jin Guangyao seemed to have regained some of his composure, but she was close enough to see there was sweat bleeding from his hairline.

She had no choice but to humor him. “I can grant you that much.”

He turned first to the crowd, ready to put on the performance of a lifetime. “Everyone here knows the Jin sect has been sorting through the Yiling Patriarch’s writings for useful inventions. You’ve all made use of them.”

There were hesitant nods all around.

“We have not publicized all, or even most, of his inventions.” Jin Guangyao continued. “You all may have suddenly developed amnesia regarding the Yiling Patriarch’s capabilities, with him behaving like... *that*...” He pointed at A-Xian and Lan Wangji, still wrapped up in each other, with his chin, “but many of his inventions are far too dangerous to let loose.”

“My inventions are mostly for farming.” A-Xian said. “I just want to make that clear. Anyone have soil damaged by resentment? I can help with that.”

“I do.” Qi Juan, said. “Or I think my son is the leader of the Bei Clan now. Much of the area around Nightless City is still tainted.”

“It’s not nearly as difficult as it sounds. It partially worked on the Burial Mounds after all, when all I had was a few sheets of talisman paper and a little ink.”

“Heavens.” Qi Juan went starry-eyed, thinking through the implications.

“Speaking of the afterlife, or the lack thereof.” Jin Guangyao interrupted. Who gave that Sacrifice Summon to Xue Yang? Xue Yang didn’t know about it. If you ever met him, you’d know he would never kill himself. Too boring. Someone must have tricked him.”

So. Jin Guangyao had decided to try to bring her down with him.

“Is that an accusation?” Jiang Yanli decided to do what someone like Jin Guangyao would never expect. “I’ll admit it. You left the Sacrifice Summon laying around in the Treasure Room we *both* have access to. Nie Huaisang and I tracked down Xue Yang, and left out a few details on what would happen when he completed the ritual.”

Nie Huaisang gasped theatrically. “Are we going to be punished for killing the man everyone came here to execute?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” A-Cheng scoffed. “Get to the point, Jin Guangyao.”

“Is that the *only* time the sacrifice summon was used?” Jin Guangyao looked at each sect leader in turn. “No one else here has been replaced?”

Even A-Cheng faltered at that. Sect Leader Yao screamed like a five-year-old child, piercing noise and all.

Jiang Yanli hesitated. If she lied now, all of her other claims would be cast under suspicion. But if she admitted it... who knew how the sect leaders would react.

A-Cheng deserved to know first.

Jin Guangyao decided for her. “You aren’t my wife.”

Jiang Yanli hoped he was satisfied with the gasps he received for that revelation. Because it was the last satisfaction he would have in this life.

“No. I’m not.” She walked over to A-Xian, placing one hand on his head, and holding the other out so Qin Su could jump from Wen Ning to her palm. “But she has a lot to say to you.”

## Chapter End Notes

Everyone has at this point entirely forgotten that Nie Huaisang said Wei Wuxian didn't kill Su She

I'm currently planning to post the last two chapters on the 29th and 30th!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Summary

Jin Guangyao has one last trick up his sleeve...

## Chapter Notes

If you're not worried about CWs, they contain spoilers, but if you are there's a pretty big one!

**CW:** character death (the expected one), suicide of an already dying character (skip from "After all that, Jin Guangyao was still" to "“Xiongzhong,” Lan Wangji attempted to approach" to avoid)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Qin Su did have a lot to say, and she projected it at an impressive volume for a spirit in a paper doll. *<I thought you were hardworking and mistreated, but all this time everyone else was right about you, you heartless, conniving, cold-blooded snake!>*

Jin Guangyao opened his mouth, probably to claim he had been a good husband, and shut it, remembering what Jiang Yanli had implied she knew.

“Who are you then?” A-Cheng demanded, impatient to get this over with. Never suspecting the answer might be her.

Jiang Yanli hesitated, wondering if he would even believe her. A-Cheng had this idealized version of her in his head, of an altruistic, gentle caretaker, as much a mother as a sister. He respected her mind, appreciated her assistance in rebuilding the sect, but always saw her as someone who needed to be protected.

She enjoyed taking care of people, preferred to be gentle, and could not contest any accusations of altruism. Not after how she’d died. But she couldn’t be certain A-Cheng would believe her behind all this.

If only she had a convenient bowl of soup to serve him. It had been so simple with A-Xian.

But then, he had seen glimpses of her steel when all she’d had at her disposal was words, as when she had ruined Jin Zixun’s reputation at Phoenix Mountain, and understood how that



mutual gap in their memories that was the afterlife might have changed her.

She waited too long to answer.

“At a guess? Jiang Yanli.” Jin Guangyao grimaced as A-Cheng gasped, tightening his grip. “I’ll admit, you had me fooled. But you nearly called Wei Wuxian A-Xian earlier, and Wen Qing started to call you Yanli. More than that, you are soft spoken, but your words cut like daggers. I know only one dead woman with that quality who would not start with the words son of a whore.”

“That almost sounds like a compliment.” She had not thought Jin Guangyao took much notice of her, in those days.

“I am capable of recognizing a worthy opponent.”

He was also capable of cloying flattery.

Breaking off their exchange, she addressed the ground, and her brother. “Yes, I am Jiang Yanli. And I have as much right to hold the Peacock Throne in my son’s name as Jin Guangyao does to hold it in his own.”

“Legally speaking, Jiang Yanli would have the greater right.” Sect Leader Ran probably thought he was helping,

“Thank you for pointing that out.” Jin Guangyao said through gritted teeth and laughed, high pitched and uneven. “You’ve already arrested me, what are a few more strikes to the heart?”

“You did this to yourself when you hurt the people we care about. You killed my husband, my brother, and so many others. This is the consequences of your actions finally catching up to you.” Jiang Yanli fell back into her own speech patterns more easily than she might have expected, thanks no doubt to all that time spent with A-Qing, where all she had to be was herself. “If any part of your parentage should be insulted, it’s your father’s. With a list of offenses this long, you’re his true heir. A true representation of the worst of the Jin.”

“A-Jie?” A-Cheng let go of Jin Guangyao’s arms to step towards her. He froze before reaching her, afraid she might evaporate as soon as he touched her.

“A-Cheng, I’m here,” Jiang Yanli threw herself into his arms, wrapping one arm around his neck, careful to keep the other free and not crush Qin Su.

He *did* recognize her. And without any soup.

“Jiejie, Jiejie, you’re alive.” He began to sob into her shoulder, uncaring of who was watching. She patted his back, letting him soak years’ worth of pent-up feelings into her robes.

Over A-Cheng’s shoulder, she saw A-Xian using Lan Wangji’s wider sleeve to dry his eyes. He smiled through his tears, but did not move to join them.

“Did you not say Xue Yang’s soul was destroyed when he resurrected the Yiling Patriarch?” She didn’t catch who spoke.

“The Sacrifice Summon does work like that. So what is this?” Jin Guangyao demanded, eyes glued to Qin Su.

By the time Jiang Yanli swallowed back a threatening wave of tears, Qin Su had already answered.

*<I am not a resentful spirit, if that’s what you’re accusing me of.>* Qin Su laughed bitterly.  
*<The audacity, A-YAO, of daring to point fingers after all you’ve done.>*

Jiang Yanli cleared her throat. “We were confused by that at first, but A-Xian and Wen Qing have more knowledge of such things, and were able to come up with a theory.”

A-Xian was, as always, easily distracted by the mere mention of cultivation theory. “What happens if you draw a Spirit Attraction Flag incorrectly?”

Mo Xuanyu answered quickly, eager to impress the man he admired. “You might summon spirits from a wider or smaller distance, or repel them instead. In the worst instance, you might invite them to possess you. All of these can result from small mistakes in writing the characters, which is why it is not recommended to use them alone.”

Mo Xuanyu had definitely tested them alone.

“Excellent, yes!” A-Xian beamed, making Mo Xuanyu flush at the praise. “So you can see how small alterations in an array can have unanticipated consequences. Qin Su did not fulfill one of the requirements for the array — the condition of revenge, you’ll find Shijie doesn’t have marks like these on her arms.” He pulled his arm free of Lan Wangji, undid his wrist wrapping, and pushed up his sleeve to reveal seven bumpy scars, pale compared to the surrounding skin, and one cut with no sign of healing. “So the array gave Qin Su’s body to Shijie, but didn’t know what to do with her soul.”

“We believe their souls are fused.” Wen Qing said, much more succinctly. “Qin Su’s soul is now anchored to Jiang Yanli’s, rather than a body, and so she has some flexibility, as you see.”

There was no need for anyone to learn of Qin Su’s ability to possess animals. That would only derail everything again.

Fortunately, the current batch of sect leaders were not prone to philosophizing, with the exception of the Lan, and Lan Xichen was in the middle of a breakdown. The majority had tuned out the moment A-Xian started lecturing, and the rest accepted the explanation as it was.

“What in the world possessed you to do this?” Jin Guangyao demanded of Qin Su.

*<I overheard you and Su Minshan after you threw Xue Yang out of Koi Tower. Do you remember that? You stole my life and I don’t even have to explain how to ruin you. There are*

*so many other things to condemn you with.*> Qin Su turned around in Jiang Yanli's hand, signaling her unwillingness to speak another word to him.

"I want to know." Sect Leader Yao raised his hand halfway.

"My sister does not have to air her trauma so you can glut yourself on gossip. Satisfy yourself with what you've already been given." Qin Xifeng snapped. "I'm sorry, Meimei. I can't say I would have believed you if you came to me, but I do now."

<*Oh. Thank you, Jie*> Qin Su sounded bemused. Understandably. Jiang Yanli could not imagine what it would have been like if her father came into her kitchen and started asking how she estimated how much of each spice to add by eye.

A-Cheng lifted his head from her shoulder, and sniffed loudly. "Wei Wuxian, come over here."

"Ah?" A-Xian looked around like there might be someone else by his name in the room.

"A-Jie's here. I don't have to be angry at you anymore." A-Cheng grumbled.

A-Xian did not budge from Lan Wangji's lap. "I don't think it works that way?"

A-Cheng pulled back just far enough to turn his head and roll his eyes. "Get over here and let me hug you."

Exchanging a glance with his lover, A-Xian convinced Lan Wangji to — with great reluctance — withdraw his arms. Then he was rising to his feet, and leaping forward, crashing into them with a force he never would have dared to use on Jiang Yanli's original body. She stumbled, and laughed, and when the feather-light touch of Qin Su's paperman moved up her sleeve, clutched them both close.

"As soon as this is over, I'm going to make you both some *soup*." And that was when she started crying. At the thought of both her boys, gathered around a pot, arguing over the largest piece of meat, she could no longer hold back the tide.

"A-Ling needs to try — He needs to meet —" A-Cheng choked on his words. "You're both coming with me to Lotus Pier immediately."

Oh, how she wished. "That's not how politics work, A-Cheng. We're in the middle of overthrowing the Chief Cultivator. There will be consequences to sort out."

"Fuck politics." A-Cheng let go of her briefly to gesture at what she presumed were his disciples. "Two of you, go pick up A-Ling and bring him here with a full escort. When you get back to Lanling, send someone to me to make sure it's safe."

"I can't wait to meet him as myself." A-Xian's voice wavered.

"How do I explain to my son that his aunt is his mother?" It was just a coincidence that a new wave of tears choked her then.

Two hands patted her back, one more awkwardly than the other. “We’ll think of something, Shijie. I promise.”

“You planning to keep that promise?”

“A-Cheng.” She chastised. He was *not* allowed to ruin this moment.

“Listen, Jiang Cheng, I can’t be what I promised to you all those years ago, but —”

“Jin Guangyao is escaping!” Someone screamed, and a wave of resentful energy tore her brothers away from her.

There was a thick cloud of resentful energy streaming from Jin Guangyao’s pocket. And as usual, Qin Su was the only one who saw it. Wei Wuxian seemed to sense it, frequently glancing over at Jin Guangyao and squinting, but he stayed mostly relaxed in Hanguang-jun’s arms, watching the proceedings.

He was planning something, and she was the only one who could see it.

Also, her sister had apologized to her, so the world must be ending.

At least Jiang Yanli got to reunite with her brother first.

The rest of the room continued its arguing, quickly forgetting that Qin Su was present, and a talking, thinking person with opinions of her own. A significant part of her wanted to pull a Nie Huaisang and start throwing pottery. Unfortunately, she had no hands.

“Jin Guangyao is escaping!” Sect Leader Yao yelled — and he should have let him.

Disciples from several sects cut off his exit, while others closed in from behind. Cornered, Jin Guangyao looked desperately in all directions, and found no way out. His spiritual power sealed off, sword confiscated, and nothing like the storied power of Chifeng-zun to break through that block and take down his enemies empty handed at his disposal.

Yet Jin Guangyao smiled so wide his dimples distorted his face into a horrifying rictus, and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a chunk of Yin Iron.

Impossible, the only piece left was supposed to be in the keeping of —

Nie Huaisang gulped, backing his way towards shelter, looking like someone who knew exactly how badly he’d fucked up.

Without his spiritual power, Jin Guangyao could not summon his guqin. He had no choice but to use himself as a conduit for the resentful energy he called forth if he wanted to escape.

Dozens of trails of resentful energy burst free of the Yin Iron like a firework, and he stood his ground. Qin Su had heard of the chilling laughter and terrible power of the Yiling Laozu at Nightless City, but never before had she seen its match. In her least anchored state, with only

a body made of paper rather than flesh to ground her, it felt like Jin Guangyao created skin for her, only to peel it back with a blunted blade.

In those first critical moments, she froze. Qin Su had never felt anything like this before.

A thick tendril reeled back and struck, piecing towards Wen Ning, flooding his eyes and mouth and lifting him into the air so he dangled limply. The next came for her.

It engulfed them in choking midnight, separating Jiang Yanli from the others, and sweeping Qin Su's paperman into the air on its current. Wei Wuxian was pulled from the cloud by Hanguang-jun, dragging his unconscious brother with him.

Jiang Yanli stumbled free on her own, and into Wen Qing's arms. They exchanged a look, and Wen Qing pulled her flute from her pocket, intent on helping her brother. Jiang Yanli attempted to follow her brothers, but was cut off by cloud after cloud of smoke cutting through her path, driving her ever closer to a man who intended to kill her. She drew Chunsheng, but every cloud she slashed through reformed and pushed her onwards with a vengeance.

Qin Su had never attempted to control resentful energy on anything approaching this scale. Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian had their theory on what she was now, thanks to Wen Ning. Yet she hesitated to use the power it gave her, anathema to everything she had been taught, even after Wen Ning.

Now, she had no choice but to embrace it.

Tentatively, she reached out for the cloud around her, and it pushed back. Almost a living, breathing thing of death, made from the screams of hundreds upon thousands of souls. It saw her, and it feared her.

The Yin Iron could sever souls from bodies effortlessly, and in this raw form it gnawed and burrowed and hollowed out its wielder with every breath, yet it had little knowledge of women made of paper and a spark of life.

Qin Su reached for it again, probing gently at the edges and it — purred, and dropped her, angry at its own response.

By the time she regained her paper legs, disoriented by her outsized surroundings, and located Jiang Yanli, she had reached Jin Guangyao. Qin Su grabbed onto a cloud passing in that direction, and let it carry her as close as possible, letting go when it swerved back into the panicked, blinded crowd.

Lan Xichen was held in a coil of resentful energy, pleading with him. "A-Yao, stop this! You don't have to do this! Just run, while they're distracted."

"Would you come with me?" Jin Guangyao asked, and only when Lan Xichen hesitated did it become clear that he begged not for his lover's sake, but for that of everyone else. "Exactly. They can't hurt us if we're the only survivors."

“This is insane!” Lan Xichen cried. “You’re qi deviating, you need to stop! Put down the Yin Iron!”

“Oh, Erge. I couldn’t if I wanted to.” His voice was sweeter than sugar, and the worst sound she had ever heard.

She continued to creep closer, despite the way it seemed to push her back, a physical force and a scream that blistered her soul.

Jiang Yanli slashed one final time at the resentment before her, and it parted, revealing Jin Guangyao to her.

“Jiang Yanli, thank you for joining us.” The words were spoken with his usual authority, yet punctuated with more unhinged laughter. “I always knew you were more trouble than my father thought. I always wanted to express my admiration for the time you ruined dear-dead Zixun’s entire reputation. And all the ideas you put in my brother’s head? I used so many of those. But I never suspected you were *this* clever. If only A-Su hadn’t made such a rash decision. You could have achieved great things in your next life.”

“I still have things to do in this life.” She held Chunsheng in a two-handed grip, leveled with the point towards his heart. For all the good that would do her with Jin Guangyao able to bat her away like a twig or flood her body with resentment.

Qin Su crept up Jiang Yanli’s back, nearly slipping on her robes more than once as she multitasked, trying to convince the resentment binding Lan Xichen that if it released him, there would be far more satisfaction to come as Jin Guangyao was driven further into his qi deviation.

“Hmm, no. I don’t think so.” Almost lazily, he sent a stream of resentment streaming towards her.

<Hold your breath!> Qin Su shouted.

Jiang Yanli brought Chunsheng up to meet it barely in time, and the resentment parted around the sword, obscuring everything else. She panted heavily when it passed.

Qin Su had lost her grip on the resentment holding Lan Xichen, and had to begin again.

Jin Guangyao tried again, but this time Jiang Yanli knew what to do, and Qin Su crept below the cloud to keep her focus.

“You’re more skilled than I gave you credit for,” Jin Guangyao resorted so easily to flattery.

“Your *sister* is more skilled than you gave her credit for.” Jiang Yanli replied, just as Qin Su’s coaxing finally worked.

The coil holding Lan Xichen dissolved. Jin Guangyao whirled towards him, calling forth pitch-dark resentment to pool around his hand.

In Jin Guangyao's moment of distraction, Jiang Yanli darted forward to stab him in the side. She danced back just as quickly, dodging the reflexive blow Jin Guangyao sent after her.

Qin Su had taught her so well.

Clutching his side, Jin Guangyao coughed up a glob of blood that hung from his lip and oozed down his chin.

Jiang Yanli grabbed Lan Xichen by the elbow, and ran, Qin Su dangling from a strand of her hair. As they retreated, blood began to drip from Jin Guangyao's eyes.

"You helped me." Lan Xichen breathed, when they found shelter behind a pillar.

"I wouldn't just leave you there." It was that simple for Jiang Yanli. "Now help me end this."

He grimaced — and nodded.

*<I think I can take the Yin Iron away from him.>* Qin Su said. *<Can you get the Lans to play a liberation or suppression song?>*

"A-Su, I'm —" He seemed to recall the urgency of the situation. "Yes."

Qin Su caught onto the next passing cloud, coaxing it into carrying her to Wen Ning. It dropped her onto his head at an angle, as he continued to dangle by seven strands of resentment flooding his orifices. She grabbed onto his hair like she had Jiang Yanli's and hung there, poking once more through the familiar pathways of his mind for a way to cut him free.

Wen Qing caught sight of her, and paused her playing. Qin Su tried to shout for her to continue, but her voice was drowned out by shouts and smoke like rushing wind.

She focused on her task.

Wen Ning was attuned, naturally, to the ambient resentful energy. A pathway wide open that filtered through every part of him, necessary for his continued existence, yet leaving him susceptible to outside influence.

Yet there was already too much for Jin Guangyao to control without a conduit, He could not control Wen Ning's actions anymore than he could control the inevitability of his deviation. All he could do was flood Wen Ning with the same chaotic power tangling itself in knots around the hall.

The flood was too great for Qin Su to gain a foothold.

But then, Lan Xichen kept his promise.

Notes of a calming song washed over her, and the spirits within the Yin Iron quieted slightly. This must be Rest, the Lan song to gentle the dead. Qin Su was relieved it didn't seem to affect her.

From her position, she caught a glimpse of Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian, having taken seats off to the side of the room to play. Soon after they began, the other Lans joined in, Lan Xichen last of all. Wen Qing, too, resumed her playing.

With every musician added, the force of the resentful energy weakened, its rate slowing until it was something she could hope to manage.

She held closed the entry point for resentful energy within Wen Ning, cutting him off from the new supply of resentful energy like the reverse of putting pressure on a bleeding wound. Wen Ning dropped to the ground, and stared at his sister. Wen Qing hugged him quickly, and ran off, towards a group of injured cultivators, to offer aid if it might be accepted.

Qin Su found herself still partway within Wen Ning's mind when he noticed her, sending a questioning thought. It was easier, after so long living in Jiang Yanli's head, to explain what she needed without words.

To her relief, he agreed.

If this worked, Wen Qing could yell at her later.

She focused once again on Jin Guangyao, the air between them now less crowded with resentment, as swaths of it doubled back to converge on him.

He lashed out in one direction, then another, shouting at images only he could see in quick succession.

"A-Song, please! A-Niang!" He spun halfway around and called, pleading and desperate. "Erge, A-Huan, please don't go! I didn't mean it, I didn't!"

Another spin, and a shout in anger. "Dage! You took everything from me!"

He had passed the point of no return, Qin Su realized, but the Yin Iron could do far more damage before it burnt him out completely. Qi deviation was a slow, lingering death. She did not begrudge Wen Qing and Nie Huaisang for leading him to this point. It was exactly the fate he deserved.

But it was currently making her life difficult.

The Yin Iron did not want her. She was a danger, something it could not touch. But it wanted Wen Ning, the most tempting bait in not just the room, but all the lands surrounding it. A sentient mind for it to feed on, highly susceptible to control by resentful energy.

The Yin Iron tore free of Jin Guangyao's fist, breaking his fingers backward in the process. It punched through any object it encountered on the way, as one unlucky disciple learned. Flying too fast to stop before it reached them. It began to slow down, enough that it would embed itself in Wen Ning's muscle rather than overshoot and push his unbeating heart from his chest.

Wen Ning's nature and her current hold on him let Qin Su communicate what she wanted without speaking. As it reached him, Wen Ning punched the Yin Iron at an angle, sending it



flying into the floor. Qin Su put the force of her mind behind that blow.

The Yin Iron broke through stone, burrowed through earth, buried itself so deep it would take someone who knew the exact location decades to retrieve.

Jin Guangyao stared at him, his hair a loose brutal mess around his bloody face. He dropped to his knees.

They had won.

Qin Su had always known — if not always believed — that she was more than an unwanted wife and spare child. She had been a competent cultivator, a good mother, and she had excellent taste in art.

She still had excellent taste in art, and a new kind of power that was hers alone.

Qin Su could identify and remove curses, speak to spirits, and who knew what else. She couldn't have her old life back, but she wanted to find out what she could do with this one.

The ache of A-Song's absence would never leave her, but she would plant him a garden of wildflowers in her heart and tend it diligently with every choice she made and all the experiences she would have wanted to share.

Around her, exhausted cultivators collapsed to the ground, even as Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Laozu transitioned almost imperceptibly into a song of longing and contentment meant for them alone.

As the remaining resentful energy dispersed in glittering sparks of blue and gold, a wave of soul-deep exhaustion crashed over her. A force she could not fight tugged at her, calling her home.

She was no longer in the paperman, but somewhere familiar and warm and dark.

Then there was nothing.

Jiang Yanli stumbled, as Qin Su came home, with no shield between her, and the echoes of the Yin Iron. Spots danced across her vision, and she slipped. Arms wrapped around her, steadying her, too slim to be either of her brothers'. When the spots cleared, she saw A-Qing watching her with concern, close enough to kiss.

She didn't lean in, not then. Jiang Yanli had promised she would never where Qin Su could feel it, and Qin Su was still there.

Yet she didn't stir, no matter what Jiang Yanli thought at her.

After all that, Jin Guangyao was still not dead. Though he wept enough blood he should have been blind, he crawled across the floor toward Lan Xichen, leaving a thick trail of blood in his wake.

Lan Xichen stood, sword in one hand, instrument in the other, and watched him come, too numb or exhausted to react.

“Erge, please, you’re the one person I never wanted to hurt.” He got up on his knees, grasping at Lan Xichen’s robes.

Lan Xichen stared at him, and ripped his robes from Jin Guangyao’s grasp, turning away.

“Erge! No, please, no. If you think I deserve it, kill me yourself.” Jin Guangyao grabbed Shuoyue, hanging unsheathed from Lan Xichen’s hand, by the blade, and set its point against his own heart.

“You’re already dying, and you would ask this of me?” Lan Xichen’s voice was empty, but his shoulders shook.

“Let my last sight in this life be your eyes.” Jin Guangyao begged.

Jiang Yanli wondered how much of this was yet more manipulation. She supposed she would never know — and neither would Lan Xichen, which might be the point.

“No.” His voice broke, but he continued. “I love the man I thought you were, but I can’t do this.”

“I am the man you thought I was!”

“No. You’re not.” Lan Xichen pulled Shuoyue away, leaving gashes dripping blood in Jin Guangyao’s palms.

“Hold him down. He can’t be far from bleeding out.” A-Cheng ordered.

Jin Guangyao spun around, eye wide. He grabbed for Lan Xichen’s sword, and anything he might have done next was blocked by the disciples coming his way. Lan Xichen stumbled away without his sword a moment later, and collapsed to his knees in horror, a spatter of blood that was not his own across his face.

Nie Huaisang watched with an expression somewhere between satisfaction and disappointment.

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji attempted to approach him, but he flinched away. A-Xian came up behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist, and Lan Wangji turned into him, clutching at his back.

More bodies than just Jin Guangyao’s were scattered across the floor, not a single sect leader among them. Certain colors of robe were more common than others, and the living members of several sects were no longer in the hall at all. Of course the Yao were one of them.

They could be tracked down later. Let them panic for one night. She did not have the energy to arrange a search to bring them back.

She barely had the energy to deal with the cultivators who remained.

“We’ll resume tomorrow.” Jiang Yanli announced. “There is much to discuss, but I believe many of us need medical care, and everyone is in dire need of rest. Do I have a disciple capable of summoning the healers and some servants? Perhaps the morticians?”

Three Jin disciples immediately ran off to fulfill her orders. She sighed in relief. For now, at least, they still recognized her authority.

“I believe resuming tomorrow would be for the benefit of all,” A disheveled, but otherwise uninjured Sect Leader Zhai said.

Mianmian, leaning against Qin Xifeng and Jin Huiqing, all of them half awake, loudly groaned her agreement.

That settled, Jiang Yanli went to find her family, leaving heavily on A-Qing.

A-Cheng was seated on the floor, grumpily allowing Mo Xuanyu to tend a small, but heavily bleeding cut on his forehead. She and A-Qing joined A-Xian, standing nearby as he continued to comfort his lover.

Wen Ning made it over shortly after, somehow flush with energy. He grabbed his sister out from under Jiang Yanli’s arms, and lifted her off the ground in a hug. She protested weakly and, as Jiang Yanli’s own brothers would not have, just as quickly put her down. A-Qing patted his head and told him she was proud of him, and he beamed.

“I expected trouble from Wei Wuxian but A-Jie. When did you learn to stab people like that?” A-Cheng complained.

A-Xian snorted, and she laughed, and for the moment, this was almost everything she wanted. Only Qin Su was — not missing, but not exactly present either.

A wave of dizziness crashed over her, and she had to lean on A-Qing to keep her feet. “I think I’ll make that soup tomorrow.”

“Can we camp on your floor and talk until we fall asleep like we used to?” A-Cheng asked, with a childish pout she suspected it had been a very long time since he last had the opportunity to use.

A-Xian was torn. “I think Lan Zhan’s going to need me —”

“You can bring your stupid betrothed.” Jiang Cheng grumbled.

As they argued, Mo Xuanyu snuck off to find that boy from the Kong sect he liked, thinking himself unnoticed.

“We’re not betrothed.” A-Xian said.

“Yet,” Lan Wangji said, with his head still on A-Xian’s shoulder.

“Why the hell not?” A-Cheng demanded.

A-Xian sighed, and for once in his life, did not rise to the bait. “Wen Ning, you don’t have to sleep, but do you want —”

“Fine, bring the Wens too, if you must.” A-Cheng squinted, finally noticing A-Qing’s arm wrapped around Jiang Yanli’s waist as they leaned into each other. “A-Jie. A-Jie, are you and Wen Qing?”

She glanced at A-Qing, and found she was biting her lip, a hint of a flush in her cheeks. There could only be one answer. “Yes.”

If he grumbled something that sounded suspiciously like “better than the last one,” she pretended not to hear.

“Don’t tell me you want to join too.” A-Xian said, as Nie Huaisang approached.

“Oh, no.” Nie Huaisang said. “You’re all going to fall asleep within five minutes anyway. I just want to steal the room that was assigned to Jiang-zongzhu. It has the best bed.”

A-Cheng waved him off. “Go ahead.”

Back in her rooms in the Fragrance Hall, without an enemy down the hall, Jiang Yanli pulled three sets of bedding from the linen closet, and handed them out. Though this had been A-Cheng’s idea, he was out the moment his head touched the ground. A-Xian and Lan Wangji fussed over each other as they made up their own bed, and Wen Ning curled up in a corner.

A-Qing slid into bed with her, pillowing her head on Jiang Yanli’s shoulder. Tension released in her shoulders, and the thrum of adrenaline finally began to fade.

A-Cheng rolled over in his sleep, muttering, “My pork, get your own, Wei Wuxian.”

She muffled her laughter into A-Qing’s shoulder, and heard a cut off snort from the floor as A-Xian did the same.

In the deepest part of her mind, Qin Su stirred slightly, and Jiang Yanli received the impression she was also dreaming of soup.

There was more work than she cared to think about to be done in the morning, but for now, this was everything she wanted.

## Chapter End Notes

I got some requests earlier on in this fic for Jiang Yanli to stab Jin Guangyao (or use her sword more) and I wanted her to stay mostly a guile hero, but she can stab him once, as a treat 😊

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 27

## Chapter Summary

### Epilogue!

## Chapter Notes

**CW::** a well meaning but ableist comment, two smut scenes (wangxian's between "Lan Zhan sat on their borrowed bed" and "Jiang Yanli was immensely grateful for Mianmian.", yanqing's features very light, playful power play and is between "Well, if my doctor insists." and "Later that night")

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Jiang Yanli wore her own face to the meeting that determined the future of the cultivation world. Her mask was A-Xian's most realistic yet, including many of the tiny imperfections and creases when she smiled or frowned or furrowed her brow that had been missing from previous versions. She felt more like herself than she had since her resurrection, even as she dressed in robes fit for a coronation.

This was, Jiang Yanli hoped, the last time she would wear this much gold.

She had nearly dismissed Nie Huaisang out of hand when he popped up in her room the morning after they deposed Jin Guangyao so early not even Lan Wangji was awake, carrying a monstrosity of gold thread. Embroidered with peonies and peacocks, and sewn with sparkling emeralds, the matching ornaments weighed as much as she did. It was, he claimed, an heirloom passed down from sect leader to sect leader until Jin Guangshan's grandparents decided not to inform their son of its location.

Its miraculous recovery would signal that Jiang Yanli did not intend to entirely upend the traditions of the Cultivation World and would instead usher in an age of prosperity. At the same time, it would mark her indisputably as a leader. Or so Nie Huaisang said.

Qin Su, groggy but awake, said it made her look more like a decorative artwork than a person. But Nie Huaisang was convincing as usual, and Jiang Yanli found herself wearing the thing before she realized she had agreed.

Jiang Yanli sent servants knocking on the guest room doors at a far more reasonable hour with breakfast and invitations for the sect leaders to meet in for a tour of the dungeons.

She arrived at the dungeons on her brother's arm precisely on time and watched her guests react. Jiang Yanli had worried it would look like she was styling herself an empress, but it seemed Nie Huaisang had been right. Most sect leaders appreciated a show, even now.

*I'll admit to you I was wrong, but don't tell Nie Huaisang.* Qin Su said. She'd wanted to be there for this, even though it would inevitably result in hours of argument over minute details.

Several faces were missing. Sect Leader Yao and several others had run, and kept running after escaping the banquet hall, and were yet to be located. Sect Leader Ouyang had ordered his disciples to carry him out of harms way, but only as far as an inn in town. His broken leg did him no favors in travel, and it had been easy to find him and bring him back with the promise of a competent healer's attention.

The Lan were represented by a different face than expected.

Jiang Yanli bowed to all of those assembled, and they bowed in turn, save Sect Leader Ouyang who made an awkward attempt from his chair, carried by servants.

"I hope you are all feeling much improved this morning. I believe the matters we gathered yesterday to discuss have been settled rather conclusively, but we have been presented with a new set of problems."

The tour of the dungeons passed quickly, led by Mo Xuanyu. Everyone agreed that the evidence there was damning, and the ghosts must be put to rest post haste. They reconvened in a small, informal meeting room.

Though the corpses — a total of thirty-three: twenty-nine disciples, and four unlucky servants — had been removed from the banquet hall to be prepared for burial or transport back to their sects, the place was in no state for a meeting.

"What about the Yiling Laozu?" Sect Leader Ouyang asked as soon as they were settled, seeming to expect a supportive response.

She interlaced her fingers on top of the table and said, very politely, "What about my didi?"

He cleared his throat, no longer able to meet her eyes. "Nothing. Nothing."

Acting Sect Leader Du, young and inexperienced, had to hide a snicker.

When no one else dared to question A-Xian's continued freedom, Jiang Yanli continued as though he had not spoken. "We are now short a Chief Cultivator. He is the third one in a row to die under disreputable circumstances."

"That is indeed a concerning pattern. I assume you believe yourself to have found a solution?" Lan Qiaohui asked. The night before while everyone else slept, including his own disciples, Lan Xichen had flown all the way to the Cloud Recesses and pulled the elders from their beds to announce he would be entering seclusion. Not even his uncle managed to pry the full story from him before he barred the doors of the Hanshi, but what Lan Qiren did learn led him to dispatch Lan Qiaohui immediately.

She had arrived uncertain whether she was joining a meeting or retrieving Hanguang-jun's corpse. Both were greatly relieved to see each other. Lan Qiaohui, because her cousin was not dead. Lan Wangji, because he had just discovered his brother's absence, and because she could take his place in the day's proceedings.

"We or our predecessors chose Jin Guangshan to become Chief Cultivator after the Sunshot Campaign." She paused for acknowledgment. "I propose keeping that method for choosing a Chief Cultivator — however, even if the title is handed down from one generation to the next, the Sect Leaders should confirm their confidence in the new Chief Cultivator. Additionally, I propose binding the Chief Cultivator to an agreement using an array. If the Sect Leaders gather and agree the Chief Cultivator is irresponsible, or a danger to the Cultivation World, they will have no choice but to step down, or face deadly consequences."

"Who would design such an array?" Sect Leader Hua asked.

"Perhaps a team of talisman experts, one from each sect." As she'd expected, at the suggestion of a collaboration, she received a murmur of genuine interest.

Sect Leader Hua frowned in surprise. "Not the Yiling Laozu?"

"Though he is the foremost expert in the design of talismans and arrays, I do not believe it would be wise to involve him in this matter. All of you should be able to trust that the array is binding and unbiased." And they would not, if A-Xian had a hand in it, though they should. He had more integrity than most of them put together.

That was, of course, why the sect leaders would never believe it of him.

*He did kill a lot of their disciples.* Qin Su reminded her. *I like him, personally, but all many of them ever saw of him was death until yesterday.*

It was all some of them would ever see in him, but so long as A-Xian was safe and happy, it mattered very little. If they ever said such things to her face, on the other hand, Jiang Yanli would make them wish they'd gotten off as easily as Jin Zixun.

*Yanli-jie...* Qin Su sighed.

"I suppose you see yourself as the best option now. Before any such array has been designed." Sect Leader Ouyang pressed, and did not retract his words despite A-Cheng leaning over the table to glare at him.

"If the sect leaders choose to nominate me for the position, I will accept." None of them could or would make the changes Jiang Yanli believed were necessary, but she could not afford to seem over eager. Fortunately, the truth was she wasn't eager, only necessary. "However, when my son reaches his majority, I would step down, cede the Jin Sect's leadership to him, and request that a Chief Cultivator who is not Jin or Jiang or Nie be chosen."

"I certainly don't want to deal with all that responsibility." Nie Huaisang fanned himself, sprawled in the wide space around him, the sect leaders on either side taking up their other



neighbors' space to avoid him. The revelations surrounding him were frightening to many, for who knew when he might turn his spies on them?

Nie Huaisang bore the ostracization with practiced good humor, and seemed to think it had been worth it. The love and loyalty of his own disciples was unshakable, and though he'd come out on the other side with few friends outside his sect, they were true ones. Qin Su intended to keep up an art-based correspondence with him, and though she had returned Suibian to A-Xian that morning, he continued to carry his saber.

"Keep me out of that bullshit," A-Cheng would hurl the title of Chief Cultivator off a cliff and bid it good riddance if given the chance, but Jiang Yanli saw reason to keep it. With the appropriate safeguards, the Chief Cultivator could be a means of preventing war and promoting accountability across their lands. The position also helped cement the sects' alliance in the event of invasion by bordering empires or kingdoms, without becoming one themselves, as Wen Ruohan and two successive Jins had wanted.

"The Lan would also like to withdraw our candidacy for the tenure of the current generation," Lan Qiaohui added. "I believe it would be best to let power shift away from the Great Sects for a time, though my cousin assures me I should support Jin-furen for this interim period. I trust his opinion in that."

The leaders of smaller independent sects straightened, seeing greater influence within their reach for the first time. The thirteen years to A-Ling's majority was not such a long time to a cultivator.

"And the client states? Are we to continue to pay you tribute?" Sect Leader Zhai finally spoke up. Jiang Yanli was surprised they had not earlier.

"I don't think it would be in my best interests to attempt to control you, Sect Leader Zhai." She said, a genuine show of humility, as Qin Su theorized how long it would take for poison to start appearing in her tea if she tried. "As for the rest of our current client states, if you would like to leave or renegotiate your agreement with the Jin, I will be taking meetings."

The other leaders of sects in the far west looked pleased, as she had expected. Those closer still had reason to stay, for the convenience of guaranteed aid from a Great Sect, but Qin Xifeng looked contemplative at the prospect of better terms.

It was a gesture that showed she did not share the desire for expansion of recent Chief Cultivators. "I have no interest in power for its own sake. I simply want to ensure that my son and his generation do not inherit the mistakes of their forefathers. Sect Leader Ouyang, your eldest is about his age, am I correct?"

Surprised to be addressed, he stumbled over his words. "Yes, a little older."

"He's never lived in a land at war with itself." Jiang Yanli said softly, hoping to conjure images of what the young Ouyang heir's life would look like if the cycle continued — or if he chose to help break it.

“I would prefer he never did.” Sect Leader Ouyang cleared his throat, reluctantly adding. “I see your point, Jin-furen.”

If even Sect Leader Ouyang could see reason, so could everyone else.

“Are we all in agreement?” She asked.

They were. With a little more discussion, it was determined that Wugang, Sect Leader Ran’s territory, was ideal for hosting the array design team, due to its central location and sect leader’s seniority. That left the matter of filling the position with someone who would agree to be bound under its conditions.

It took less time than she expected.

To both Jiang Yanli and Qin Su’s surprise, it was Qin Xifeng who said, “I believe we are also in agreement on the identity of the next Chief Cultivator.”

All eyes turned to her.

“Huaisang had this made for you, I’ve just added a few modifications.” Wei Wuxian pulled a sheet off his crowning achievement. “He said something about accepting payment in admitting he has good taste in art.”

Qin Su huffed. *<Tell him thank you, but that’s not going to happen.>*

“Tell him yourself.” Huaisang had already returned home to his gardens, and his paperwork, and his spies, taking the other witness they’d found in Wen Qing’s prison with him. It would be as easy for Qin Su to call him on a Speaking Stone as Wei Wuxian.

It was a few days after Wei Wuxian lost the title of most hated man in the Cultivation World, and he had spent much of that time working on a project with Mo — now Jin — Xuanyu. Lan Zhan and A-Yuan, brought to Lanling by Fang Xiaorong, who had since returned to Gusu with her wife, had watched for much of the process. A-Yuan was a clever boy, and once he learned his questions would be answered, no matter how many of them there were, he had dozens.

He really felt like he was starting to bond with A-Yuan.

But A-Yuan had cousins to get to know as well, and Lan Zhan did not want to overwhelm him, so he took A-Yuan out into the gardens with A-Ling, and sat quietly with the Wen siblings, letting him come to them as he wished. It seemed A-Yuan was very patiently teaching A-Ling to play jianzi, talking him through his fits of frustration when he repeatedly dropped the shuttlecock after one or two kicks.

A-Yuan was such a good kid. Wei Wuxian had made fun of Jiang Cheng under similar circumstances many times over, though of course they were much closer in age.

Apparently, A-Yuan was curious about the black veins covering Wen Ning's skin, and wanted to know all about Wen Qing's needles, but he was shier with them than he had been in first meeting Wei Wuxian. Jingyi had been a good buffer, but Wei Wuxian was also far more talkative. He thought it would be easier for all of them after they left Lanling tomorrow.

Today, though, Wei Wuxian revealed his project to its recipient.

It looked, for the moment, like a life size doll. Made from a durable, lacquered wood, Nie Huaisang had ordered it produced to the exact measurements of her body. Apparently, he had bribed her tailor. Wei Wuxian had received torso, limbs, and head in pieces, and attached them together with wire treated against rust. Inscribed on the doll's face was a mask, and when he activated it, Qin Su's face appeared.

She gasped.

With a human face on a body of wood, the doll was strange and unfinished looking. There was a long way to go before Qin Su could use it regularly. It needed the illusion of skin on the rest of its body, and hair, and a way to make the limbs move like they were flesh, blood, and bone. He would need to give her a sense of touch, as well, before she could use it regularly, or outside a private space.

But first, Wei Wuxian needed to know if she could move it as it was. He had applied paper talismans modified from his papermen to each piece as a placeholder, but a structure so much larger and more complex might need entirely different techniques.

If it did, it was back to square one for him.

"This is for A-Su?" Qin Su's older brother asked — Wei Wuxian had already forgotten his name. "So she can live a normal life?"

Wei Wuxian grimaced at the term. He was certain the man didn't mean anything by it, but he didn't like the idea that life had to meet some arbitrary standard to be worth it. What was normal anyway? Not something a cultivator had any familiarity with, that was for sure. His goal was to let Qin Su live her life more independently, not fix her. "There's nothing I can do to separate her from Shijie, but if this works —"

*<With this, I would be able to talk and move on my own at the same time. That's more than enough. Thank you, Wei Wuxian.>* Qin Su put her paper arms together, and bowed over them.

"Thank you, Yiling Laozu." Qin Su's brother also bowed, deeper than Wei Wuxian was comfortable with. Maybe if he cultivated to immortality people would eventually stop treating him like he might snap their necks at any second.

"Maybe someday we can help you be able to taste and smell, too. I have some ideas." Jin Xuanyu said, though it was far too early to make that kind of promise. Taste, in particular, was unlikely, unless he came up with some way to make a working set of guts. Wei Wuxian was a genius, but that sort of thing would take centuries, even for him.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Xuanyu.” Wei Wuxian could not believe he was saying that. Shijie had set Jin Xuanyu at him so he would learn to be more cautious in his experiments, he just knew it. “If you’d be willing to try it out?”

Qin Su walked to the edge of the table she was perched on and reached out to touch the wood. Instantly, her paperman went limp.

A beat. Two. Three. And then —

Her arm twitched, then her neck, and Qin Su slowly, jerkily pushed herself into a seated position. Animated, the doll sent chills up his spine, but the mask responded to Qin Su’s mood, and she smiled. *<Yi-ge! It’s me.>*

Her brother covered his mouth with his hands, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

It worked. Wei Wuxian grinned.

So what if the doll Qin Su was possessing looked weird now. This was already the best thing he’d ever made, because it had no purpose but to help someone. And when it was finished, Qin Su would be able to do so many of the little enjoyable things in life.

Qin Su pushed herself to her feet too quickly, and nearly fell on her face, before Wei Wuxian and Jin Xuanyu sat her back down together.

“I think it might not be ready for walking yet.” Wei Wuxian admitted. He’d have to work on that.

*<This is already more than I had to look forward to before.>* Qin Su was willing to be patient.

Wei Wuxian would not have been so calm about it in her place. “There’s a long way to go before it’s ready. I still have to make the rest of the body look human, so no one tries to exorcise you. And since I’m not staying here and need to take it with me to work on so this is just a trial. When you and Shijie come to my wedding at Lotus Pier, I’ll do the final tests, and —”

*<Wei Wuxian.>* Qin Su cut him off. *<I’d like to hug my brothers.>*

“Right.” Of course she did. Wei Wuxian did not miss that she included Mo Xuanyu in that. “I’m going to go find my betrothed and our son. Just make sure you get it back to me by tomorrow morning.”

He found Lan Zhan watching A-Yuan and Wen Ning playing with A-Ling in a garden fountain. Wen Qing was elsewhere — spending time with Shijie before they left, he hoped — so Lan Zhan occupied himself glaring at Jiang Cheng across the fountain without speaking.

Wei Wuxian sighed. Many things might change in the future, but he doubted his soon-to-be husband would ever get along with his brother.

He pecked Lan Zhan on the lips and slid into his arms, using the fact that Lan Zhan never wanted to let go of him to maneuver him over to Jiang Cheng. It was difficult not because Lan Zhan resisted, but because he leaned on him more heavily than expected.

On a warmer day, he would have joined the boys in their play. Towards the end of the summer when they all went to Lotus Pier to find out how extravagant Jiang Cheng had decided his wedding needed to be, he definitely would.

For now, they and the Wens would retreat to Lan Zhan's cousin's house in Caiyi Town since Lan Qiaohui had to move back into the Cloud Recesses as Acting Sect Leader. It would give A-Yuan time to really get to know Wei Wuxian and the Wen siblings, without disrupting his life too much. It would give Lan Zhan space from the elders' judgments, but let him teach, and visit his rabbits, and reach out to his brother, isolated in seclusion.

Wei Wuxian would experiment, and occasionally let Wen Qing poke him full of needles, and possibly teach some talisman classes out of his home. He'd already received a surprising amount of interest unprompted.

Neither he nor Lan Zhan would be able to resist a little chaos, of course, but that was what they loved about each other.

In the fountain, A-Ling shrieked as A-Yuan lightly splashed him, and hammered his fists down against the surface of the water. His attempt to create a mighty wave sent up a spatter of droplets. Spotting a tantrum threatening, Wen Ning splashed A-Yuan for him, who gasped in outrage, and splashed back.

"Still not carrying Suibian?" Jiang Cheng asked in a strange tone. Probably he was wondering if Wei Wuxian had a problem with the sword his father had given him.

Wei Wuxian sighed.

The truth was, Suibian no longer felt entirely his. He could use it without issue, and Shijie seemed to be adapting well to the return of her own sword, brought from Lotus Pier on Jiang Cheng's order. She had put aside Qin Su's with almost as much relief as Wei Wuxian had felt when he realized he would never have to touch Jiangzai again. But he had left Suibian behind by choice twice over, and it felt almost like a betrayal to pick it up again.

"New body, new sword, right?" He smiled, and wondered how long it would be before that excuse no longer worked. Before Jiang Cheng wondered what the difference was between his previous life and now, and demanded answers.

Shijie wanted him to tell, but Wei Wuxian didn't want Jiang Cheng to hate him again. So for the moment, they were at a stalemate.

"Sure." Jiang Cheng grunted.

Wei Wuxian had no idea what to say to him. So he stood there — and realized Lan Zhan was still leaning most of his weight on him. That was a sign.

“Bad pain day?” Wei Wuxian whispered in his ear.

Lan Zhan hummed in agreement.

Now that she’d been able to examine him in person, Wen Qing said the scars would never be gone, and he would likely always have bad days, but she saw signs of a recent increase in his mobility already. Wei Wuxian even got a compliment out of her for his dedication to Lan Zhan’s health, not that it was any hardship — after the lecture about risking his own with his accidental use of resentful energy. She thought with a few months of additional treatments from her — *not* the massages, those were his and no one else was permitted to touch Lan Zhan that way — Lan Zhan should be ready to spar if they were careful not to overtax him.

Jiang Cheng waved them off. “I’ll keep watching the kids and the corpse. Go be gross elsewhere.”

“Thank you, Shidi, we will!” He said cheerfully, and earned the exact groan of annoyance he was looking for.

For the sake of Lan Zhan’s dignity, he waited until they were out of Jiang Cheng’s field of view to offer him a piggyback ride. That Lan Zhan accepted told him exactly how bad it was. “Did we overdo it in your exercises, or do you think this is just a flareup?”

“The exercises were fine. I... may have held myself too stiffly today.”

“I love you petty, but please don’t hurt yourself in the process.”

It was not just about Jiang Cheng, of course. Lan Zhan wouldn’t forget to check in with his body for so long just so he could keep glaring. He’d been more tense since Lan Xichen went into seclusion, and though he spoke of it little, Wei Wuxian could tell he was dwelling. It would be good for Lan Zhan, when they were back in Caiyi Town, and he could check on his brother whenever he wanted, even if Zewu-jun was not ready to answer.

“My apologies, I will find appropriate back support next time.” Lan Zhan deadpanned, interrupting his train of thought.

Wei Wuxian snickered, and nearly dropped him.

Lan Zhan pushed the door open far enough for Wei Wuxian to shoulder it the rest of the way. He set Lan Zhan down on his feet inside, so he could close the door. Knowing Lan Zhan, he probably wouldn’t make it back to close it.

Lan Zhan sat on their borrowed bed, and allowed Wei Wuxian to help pull his boots off. His robes came off next, which gave Wei Wuxian a good idea of where this was going.

But he asked what he wanted anyway. Lan Zhan liked when he asked.

“Orgasms are excellent pain relief.” Lan Zhan looked up at him from beneath lowered eyelids.

He didn't even need to do that much to seduce Wei Wuxian. He was already seduced, one hundred percent of the time.

A slight, pained noise escaped Lan Zhan as Wei Wuxian helped him lie back. He dropped his own robes to the ground, and eased himself over Lan Zhan, careful not to let any of his weight fall on him.

“Relax. It's my turn to take care of you.”

Lan Zhan's eyes fluttered shut as Wei Wuxian's lips brushed his neck.

He worshiped Lan Zhan with teasing lips and fingers, using light, pinching shocks to distract from the pain. Lan Zhan relaxed into it, and Wei Wuxian knew this was exactly what he needed, drawing it out until Lan Zhan finally spilled onto his tongue. Lan Zhan, being Lan Zhan, demanded a little sleepily for his Wei Ying to bring his cock to him — though he used the word phallus, unironically, which Wei Wuxian had to laugh hysterically about into Lan Zhan's belly for several minutes before he could comply.

After, they kissed, languid and unhurried, tangled together on their sides, as he gently rubbed Lan Zhan's back. It wasn't a day where he was supposed to do the full massage deep into his tissue, only the crosswise rubbing of his scars that should ideally be done daily. He'd make a compress, heated with talisman to stay warm all night, when Lan Zhan wanted to sleep. But until then, Wei Wuxian was free to cuddle him within an inch of his life.

Jiang Yanli was immensely grateful for Mianmian. With Qi Juan now Acting Sect Leader of the Luochuan Bei, in her child's name, she could not have kept up all her former duties, taken on Jin Guangyao's and found a new assistant all at once. With a competent first disciple, she was able to focus on the most urgent items, like the progress on the dissolved and renegotiated client sect deals, and the investigation into her own sect, while Mianmian ensured the sect itself continued to run.

Though it had been years since Mianmian handled any part of sect management, she took to it like she had never left. Classes were not disrupted for a single day, and Mianmian had already begun revising the curriculum so the junior disciples would get a better foundation in the classics as well as the Jin techniques. She had reassigned guard patrols and night hunt teams to better cover the outlying areas of Lanling and altered the watchtower schedules to make keeping watch a less thankless duty. An order had already been played with a pottery workshop in Lanling City to replace the lost set for entertaining, she'd convinced the mistress of the orphanage to return to the original plan for her charges' education, and not a single Jin cousin had made off with more than the allotted allowance.

She thrived.

Jiang Yanli, on the other hand, had a constant headache from the endless meetings. She expected it to last for at least the first full year as Chief Cultivator. Likely longer.

As she frowned over a draft of the new trade agreement with Baota Zhai, the door to her private office opened without so much as a by your leave.

“We’re going to need a new calligraphy instructor.” Mianmian announced, leaning on the doorframe. “I just caught the old one buying that core strengthening concoction Jin Guangyao was using from one of the healers. He was planning to sell it in the market.”

Jiang Yanli groaned and rubbed her temples. “The last thing we need is people with fake cultivation texts getting a hold of those. They’ve been arrested?”

Mianmian nodded. “I’m going to oversee the search of their rooms before I go into town for the evening.”

She would probably have to have them both executed. A-Qing had meant harm to only one person when she made that tonic, and it had done its job, though Jiang Yanli would never forget the danger she’d put herself in. But if they couldn’t contain the recipe, and people desperate for a quick way to develop a core got a hold of them, they could have an epidemic of qi deviations on their hands.

A certain number of executions were inevitable, but Jiang Yanli refused to hold them without a fair trial. And when the time came, she would hate every moment of it.

The upcoming banishments by another name of the Jin cousins on the other hand, she was looking forward to.

She lowered her hands, belatedly realizing she’d forgotten to put down her brush. She wiped her forehead with a cloth and ink came away. Great.

“Into town?”

“A young merchant I met on my travels is in town.” Mianmian bit her lip, looking a little shy.

Now that was interesting. Maybe there would be another wedding in the works before the year was out. “Oh? Go have too much fun with my blessing then.”

Mianmian rolled her eyes, and started to turn to go, when Wen Qing appeared in the doorway next to her, scandalously dressed for bed.

“Have fun yourself.” Mianmian said, smug and knowing, before taking her leave.

A-Qing’s hair was loose, and she was in only her inner robes, the material clinging to her curves just enough to tempt. She had her sword in hand, reclaimed from the Treasure Room. Though she preferred not to wield it, A-Qing had rarely set it down since its return.

Jiang Yanli picked up her brush, and turned back to her paperwork.

She smiled, when A-Qing did not take that as a dismissal, instead walking into the room and closing the door behind her. “I’m leaving tomorrow, and you’re working.”



“I’m rewriting the rules of our world, A-Qing.” This had to be on its way to Baota tomorrow, and she wanted to make a final batch of pork and lotus root soup before everyone left.

Jiang Yanli was going to give in, and she knew it, but there was no harm in making her work for it.

A-Qing leaned over her desk, sword clunking against the wood. Her hair fell to obscure Jiang Yanli’s work as she pressed a kiss to her ink-stained and mask-covered forehead. “Come to bed. Doctor’s orders.”

She did not make her work for it very hard.

“Well, if my doctor insists.” She stood, quickly cleaning her brush and setting a paperweight down for the ink to dry. Rounding her desk, Jiang Yanli kissed her, holding her close by the waist, and walked her backwards toward her bedroom.

“Wait —” A-Qing pulled back, though this was exactly what she’d asked for.

“Hmm?”

“I’m not planning to return here.” A-Qing said, slyly enough Jiang Yanli knew she was planning something, and was not just reminding her of how soon they would part, and for how long. “So I shouldn’t miss the chance to fuck the Chief Cultivator on her desk.”

Having A-Qing address her by a title that had once belonged to a line of unsavory men did not sound appealing. But the idea itself — she leaned back against her desk, and unwound the sash holding her new cream robes with gold and lavender accents together. The outer layer fell open, leaving her in two layers loose enough to show more than a hint of cleavage. “The proper way to greet me is on your knees.”

A-Qing lowered herself gracefully, slow enough for Jiang Yanli to tell the kind of mood she was in today. She lifted A-Qing’s chin with a finger, swiping her thumb over her lips. They parted under her touch, but A-Qing hesitated.

“Is that mask comfortable enough for this?”

The past few days, Jiang Yanli had taken it off once they were in private. But today, she thought she would like to look like herself. “I can barely feel it. Do you prefer me without it?”

“I love you either way.” Wen Qing assured her, though she hadn’t been worried.

“This mask isn’t strange looking like the other ones were, so I believe you.”

Laughing, A-Qing rose high onto her knees, and Jiang Yanli leaned forward to meet her halfway.

“I’m waiting,” She whispered against her lips.

A-Qing sat back on her heels, a half-smile on her lips. “Just for that, I’m going to make you wait longer.”

When she lowered her mouth to skin, she began just above Jiang Yanli’s knees, and took her time. A-Qing teased her for ages, until her thighs were littered with love bites before she finally touched her where she ached for her.

“Good?” A-Qing asked, when she pulled back, as though Jiang Yanli were not still shaking under her hands.

“Very.” She breathed, “But *you* weren’t, you tease.”

A-Qing looked up at her from beneath her lashes, challenging. “Are you planning to do something about it?”

Jiang Yanli was. She lifted A-Qing onto her desk by her thighs, and more than reciprocated. *That* was something she never would have had the strength to do before.

Later that night, she lay awake in bed, with Wen Qin curled into her side, savoring every exhale onto her bare skin like it might be the last.

They would speak often using the Speaking Stones, of course, and it would be better than before, because A-Qing was free. But she would miss this.

A-Qing turned her head, loose hair falling into her eyes as she whimpered. Jiang Yanli pushed it back, and A-Qing hummed, already falling back to sleep. She needed it, more than Jiang Yanli did. The dark rings under her eyes from the last few years had yet to fade, and Jiang Yanli suspected she would have more trouble sleeping in an empty bed.

Jiang Yanli had mostly gotten used to sleeping alone, rarely woke reaching out for her husband anymore. It was strange now, to wake up relaxed in the arms of the woman with whom she intended to spend her life. Strange to know that though she would always hold A-Xuan in her heart, she had let him go.

Though her husband would never have wanted the position of Chief Cultivator and all that came with it to fall into her lap, he would have wanted her to live to her fullest. Zixuan had moved on, into whatever waited in his next life. He would have hoped for her to move on too, even if it was without him. A-Xuan had never spoken to Wen Qing, but she thought he would have liked her.

A-Xuan would be happy for her.

“You can come home anytime you want,” Jiang Yanli promised her brother-in-law at the top of the stairs to Koi Tower, as he prepared to depart with A-Xian, his betrothed, her nephew, and her heart. A-Qing’s brother was leaving with them as well, but for a short while long, he was still racing around pretending to be a hunting dog for A-Ling, much to A-Xian’s dismay.

<Maybe wait until we've finished cleaning out the place first> Qin Su added from her shoulder.

Jin Xuanyu — he had declined a new courtesy name to match the generational poem — was going to Gusu to study with A-Xian. He'd agreed, tentatively, to speak with Tan-daifu about his shifting moods while he was there. She hoped with time he might convince A-Xian and Lan Wangji and A-Qing to do the same.

"You'll be very close to the Kong Sect." Especially now, with the Lu'an Kong moving to absorb Moling, having recently taken on a new client state agreement with the Fengyang Hua in exchange for the manpower to deal with the long-mismanaged territory.

The men of the Jin family had never been good at hiding their blushes.

"You don't have to settle down already. Maybe there's a bookish little Lan waiting to sweep you off your feet." A-Xian said.

Mo Xuanyu tossed his head, showing off the red eyeshadow that now accented his eyes. "Who said anything about settling down? And maybe I won't choose just *one* man."

"Do not give Wei Ying ideas." Lan Wangji said, making A-Xian sputter.

"Hey, I'm offended! You know you're all I want, Lan Zhan, you ridiculous, jealous, beautiful man." He smacked Lan Wangji's shoulder, and noticed the expression that passed for a smirk on his betrothed's face. "You just wanted me to say that. Well, it's true. You're utterly ridiculous, unreasonably jealous, more beautiful than words can express, and mine."

Lan Wangji smiled, a shy, gentle little thing.

"I didn't know he could do that." A-Cheng grumbled.

"Be nice, A-Cheng." She warned.

"It's all right, Shijie. I'll miss him too." A-Xian did not even punch A-Cheng in the shoulder.

"When did my A-Xian get so mature?" Jiang Yanli wiped a real tear from her eye.

He gasped. "You take that back, I am still three years old!"

"You'll always be three years old to me." She hugged him, and A-Xian held on so tightly he lifted her off her feet. When he set her down, she picked up a cloth wrapped container and handed it to him. "Which is why I have soup for you, for the road."

"Shijie, you shouldn't have! How did you find the time?" His delight was more than enough to make it worth the effort.

"She took paperwork with her to the kitchens and asked me to watch the pot." A-Qing grumbled, failing to mention that she had spent much of that time distracting Jiang Yanli from said paperwork.

“I made enough to share.” She promised.

“Hmm, no, this is all mine and A-Yuan’s.” He hugged the soup close to his chest, and reeled back as A-Qing drew a long, sharp needle from her sleeve. “Joking, joking, don’t stick that in my arm. Wen Qing!”

“A-Qing.”

“He makes it so easy.”

“I’ve been saying that for years!” A-Cheng exclaimed, exchanging a nod with A-Qing.

“You’re all so mean to me.” A-Xian pouted. “Except Shijie. And Lan Zhan.”

And for that, Lan Wangji kissed him on the cheek, setting off a round of grumbling from A-Cheng.

Her family was objectively awful. She loved them all so much.

Lan Wangji interrupted A-Xian and A-Cheng’s arguing to say, “We should be leaving, if we want to reach a good inn by nightfall.”

“One last thing,” She said, and dipped A-Qing into a kiss.

A-Xian whistled, and cheered her on.

When she set A-Qing back on her feet, they were both dizzy and grinning.

Wen Ning was standing nearby with his hands over A-Ling’s eyes, as A-Ling tried to remove them.

With a final round of goodbyes — perhaps two — the group departed. As they walked down the stairs, A-Xian turned back to wave.

Then they were gone, but she was not alone.

A-Cheng was still there, for now, and Qin-Su always would be. And finally, after so very long, she had her son back.

A-Ling did not know what to do with her, alternating between clinging to his jiujiu’s skirts and wide-eyed curiosity. To her own son, she was a story suddenly made real. He was just slightly too young to understand where she had been and why she hadn’t been there with him.

A-Ling wanted to get to know her, but he was having trouble processing her entrance into his life. Gone one day and there the next, he was scared she might disappear again, and hesitated to get close. A-Ling wondered, too, why she had come back from the dead, but he still couldn’t meet his father. Jiang Yanli understood, but that didn’t stop it from hurting.

At least he was also too young to truly hate his dajiu, and had taken to him without issue.

That was the main reason they decided A-Cheng would stay a while longer, as he had enough competent disciples to keep the sect running for a few more weeks in his absence. He was, the Jiang disciples unanimously agreed, long overdue for a break.

It would give her time, too, to determine which of her own people could be trusted with A-Ling's safety.

A-Ling would continue to make frequent visits to Lotus Pier in the future, but the adjustment now would be difficult for both of them.

For the moment, A-Cheng seemed happy to have them back in his life at all, though Jiang Yanli suspected that would change when he was back in Lotus Pier with only his subordinates for company. Perhaps she might get A-Cheng a spiritual cat, a kitten that would grow into one of those enormous, fluffy cats as friendly and loyal as a dog. She and A-Xian and A-Ling could not be constantly by his side as he wanted, because that was not the direction their lives had grown. But that didn't mean they couldn't be there for him.

And someday, when A-Ling was grown and in full command of a reformed Jin Sect, Jiang Yanli might split her time between Lotus Pier and wherever A-Qing wanted to be.

"Would you like to see your A-Niang kick some of your cousins out of Lanling?" She asked her son.

A-Ling looked at her, then at A-Cheng, his thumb coming up to his lips, before he snatched it away, as if embarrassed by the childish gesture. Finally, he nodded shyly.

She offered her son her hand, and he reached out to take it, starting to walk with her without looking back for more reassurance. Seeing that, A-Cheng followed at a distance. Hoping, as she did, that this was a sign A-Ling was adapting to her.

Or perhaps he was just excited for the cousins who liked to pinch his cheeks to be gone.

*<And soon there will be peace and quiet in Lanling.>* Qin Su said, with satisfaction.

"Until the next time Nie Huaisang wants something." She pointed out.

Qin Su cringed, though Jiang Yanli knew she enjoyed their artistic debates. *<I'll try to keep him busy with fans.>*

"How many people do you think we'll need to have the servants to pack for?" She asked. Qin Su had spent far more time among the extended Jin family than she, for which Jiang Yanli was grateful.

*<Oh, all of them>* Qin Su laughed. *<I'm looking forward to it.>*

They walked on to find out, A-Ling holding her hand more firmly with every step.

Jiang Yanli and Qin Su had work to do, and lives to lead.

## Chapter End Notes

- Jiang Yanli will eventually convince the boys to have the core talk. It won't go well at first, but she'll make them work it out
- The twin jades will make up eventually, but it'll take awhile
- The next Chief Cultivator after Jiang Yanli finally gets to peace out is probably Sect Leader Zhai -- but I think Jingyi comes after them and the Cultivation World is not prepared 😈

Here we are at the end! I posted the first chapter of this on January 1, and I both can't believe it's been a year, and can't believe it's been only a year. Thank you for all the comments and kudos along the way, as well as to anyone who gets all the way here in the future! I hope you enjoyed it!

You can find me on [twitter](#), where I'll be posting wip wednesdays for new fic and other thoughts and [tumblr](#), please feel free to say hi!!!

And here's a revamped [Promo Tweet](#) for the whole story if that's your thing!

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